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**Harvard
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Review**

Career Planning

How to Get Your First Promotion

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Summary. Promotions aren't just about hard work and hitting your targets. There's an additional set of skills — being politically savvy, networking strategically, showing executive presence, and building brokerage and social capital — that are critical to help you move to the next level. Here are three things you can do to increase the odds in your favor:

- **Get real:** Examine the past five people around you who recently got promoted. What are their backgrounds, what work and roles did they do, with whom and how do they spend their time, and how do they show up? You'll have a remarkably accurate snapshot of what your organization rewards and promotes.
- **Get strategic:** Figure out who promotes you by having an honest conversation with your manager or someone in HR. When you are clearer on who holds sway, determine what those key people value, and who and what influences them. Then ensure you make visible the aspects of your work related to the areas that matter to them.
- **Get doing:** Begin to create visibility and impact and secure sponsorship. Leverage the meetings before the group meeting such as casual drop-ins at someone's office or a side conversation in a break room or lunch. Reach out to influential people to seek advice. Seeking advice is particularly effective because being sought out is flattering, shows someone put in thought and effort, and creates a bond akin to a partnership. [close](#)

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Most people believe that if you're smart, work hard, and hit your targets, you're a shoo-in for promotions. In a few organizations — that I'd argue are rarer than unicorns — you might be right.

Research shows that these factors only take us so far. There's an additional set of skills, ones we don't often discuss, that can get you promoted, increase your compensation, and open you up to more job opportunities. The most important of these include being politically savvy, networking strategically, showing executive presence, and building brokerage and social capital.

Reading this might lead you to ask yourself: Why can't your work just speak for itself? Does this mean you need to participate in office politics? Do you need to schmooze with leaders to get ahead?

The truth is, if you analyze who's gotten ahead at the places you've worked, you'll start to see a pattern. People who get promoted are often highly visible to key stakeholders. They benefit from high-level sponsors, know who to approach to make things happen, and speak up with confidence. They understand that they don't hand themselves promotions — other people do. Consequently, how those people see them is important.

This doesn't mean you need to become an unethical shark to land a promotion. It means that you need to re-examine your assumptions and learn new skills, which may feel uncomfortable until you reframe them in a positive light.

Over the years, through my coaching practice, I've seen a lot of talented people fail to get ahead while their seemingly ordinary peers or narcissistic colleagues blow right past them. This is what led me to conduct in-depth research and author my book, *Get Promoted: What You're Really Missing at Work That's Holding You Back*. I wanted to address the gap between what people are often told to do to get ahead and what they actually need to do.

Let's unpack those unspoken rules now.

How to Accelerate Your Career

Think about getting promoted as ascending to new heights in your organization. It's a lot like climbing a mountain and moving through new, challenging terrain. For example, maybe you're a successful analyst who produces insightful reports. Your data

analysis skills — important as they are to your current role — may not be what gets you promoted. Rather, leadership may be looking for someone with strong presentation or management skills to lead a cross-functional team responsible for converting your insights into a new product.

No matter the position you're in now, to succeed in navigating new terrain, and make it to that next mountain peak, you need three things:

- Reliable information about other people who have successfully scaled the mountain.
- A solid map that illuminates the terrain and routes.
- Practice honing the skills that will help you make the ascent.

These make up the three-part framework I created to help you get your next promotion:

- The Rock (“Get Real”)
- The Map (“Get Strategic”)
- The Snowball (“Get Do-ing”)

Step 1: Embrace the Rock.

When trying to secure a promotion, many of us practice popular strategies and behaviors that are prescribed to us by the business media, but that are not always relevant to our workplaces. For example, advice like “be yourself” or “be humble” are aspirational and valuable traits. In many organizations, however, applying that well-intended advice may unintentionally encourage behaviors that undercut your ability to rise — particularly in workplaces that reward people who show up confidently or take the initiative to network with senior executives or stakeholders.

This is what I call embracing the Rock: Heed the hard evidence of what actually gets people promoted in your particular organization.

To figure out what leadership competencies your organization values, conduct a quick analysis. Examine the last five people on your team (or who you work closely with) who were promoted. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What are their backgrounds?
- What jobs did they do?
- With whom and how did they spend their time?
- How did they show up at work every day?

Now, do the same for five people who did not get promoted (or got demoted). What themes or patterns arise in your answers?

As an example, one of my clients — let's call her Alex — did this exercise. She found that people who secured promotions at her company were typically men who attended the same college and who worked closely with one of three bosses. Each of the men had aggressively closed big deals, at the expense of pitching in to help with team tasks and administrative work. Most of the administration work was completed by team members who were not promoted. If Alex wished to advance, she had three paths forward:

- “Adapt” to the culture by using these strategies to the extent that was feasible or desirable. She couldn't change her gender or background, but she could get on projects with those bosses.
- Break the (problematic) norms by creatively tapping into the drivers that get people promoted. She could create or lead an activity that helped top stakeholders achieve the things they

cared about, thereby building her network, reputation, and visibility.

- Plan to go elsewhere that was a better fit, with better odds, and use her firm as a platform to enable that.

After conducting this exercise, like Alex, you'll have a remarkably accurate snapshot of what your organization rewards and promotes.

Step 2: Use the Map.

Step 2 is all about naming your destination and understanding the landscape. Who do you need to impress — on your side — to get to where you want to go? In Alex's case, she wanted to make partner (her destination). She had already learned that she needed to impress one of three bosses to become visible (her landscape).

In your case, if this is not immediately obvious, I recommend making a power map. First, figure out how the promotion process works, focusing on who needs to approve what at each level. This is typically a conversation you want to have with your manager. In your next one-on-one meeting, ask: "I'm curious about how growth opportunities arise at the company. Specifically on our team, how does the process work? Would you be open to discussing this with me today, or in a follow up meeting?" If your manager is not open or gives you a vague answer, speak to someone in HR — or better yet, a senior leader or recently promoted colleague who knows the ins and outs of the organization and may provide you with useful, off-the-record commentary.

Once you're clear on who holds sway, determine what those people value, and who and what influences them. Analyze their backgrounds. Who do they spend time with and listen to — or butt heads with? Think like a detective: Research them (their LinkedIn profile, social media posts, or other published content), chat with colleagues who may know them well, and pay attention to what they say or do in company meetings. If you have the chance, ask them about their values and goals directly. For instance, at a coffee or lunch meeting, ask, “What are your major goals for the company this year? What does success here look like to you? What are you most worried about?”

Make sure your questions are open-ended and relatively high-level. Most people will care about the typical things (revenue or share growth, delivering a key company priority, managing cost). Even so, look deeper for special initiatives, causes, or emerging trends that they name.

After doing this work, for instance, you may learn that your boss is responsible for initiating your promotion, but that a VP above them will ultimately decide if you secure it. Besides your boss, who will be influencing the VP? Is it the HR director? An outside consultant? As you conduct your research, you may even discover “hidden” influencers — like an assistant or the VP's friend in a different department. What do each of these people value? If the VP and director are deeply focused on innovation — and care less about certain products or cost control — prioritize making the aspects of your work related to that area visible.

Step 3: Start Building the Snowball.

After you understand the Rock (*what* gets people promoted) and the Map (*who* holds sway), Step 3 is all about taking action. Now is the time to ensure your work is visible to stakeholders, and that you have a strong network supporting you along the way. This step involves taking small strategic steps that, like a snowball rolling down a mountain, will give you real momentum.

In Alex's case, her map helped her identify three partners who strongly influenced promotions. She uncovered what each cared most about: closing deals, executing them successfully, and creating high-impact teams. But she was largely invisible to them on these fronts. In biweekly meetings, she was often silent. She worried about hogging airtime, commenting on things she knew little about, and was humble to her detriment — reverting to comments like, “I don't have much experience in this,” when asked to weigh in. Her actions had huge unintended consequences, leading the partners to see her as disengaged and inexperienced. To the stakeholders, she didn't appear ready for a promotion.

To change that dynamic, Alex got proactive. Let's focus on two steps she took, and that you can take too: creating visibility and impact, and securing sponsorship.

1) To create visibility and impact, meet before the meeting.

Alex began to orchestrate one-on-one chats with leaders, coworkers, and even former colleagues with relevant expertise before her biweekly team meetings. These one-on-ones were short — quick impromptu calls, casual drop-ins, side conversations in the break room, or discussions prompted from showing up early to Zoom calls or remaining on the line after others had left. During each informal conversation, with the agenda of the upcoming meeting in mind, she asked questions to gain insights

that would prepare her to contribute. More importantly, she learned that her quantitative skills, industry background, and alumni networks were valuable assets to her growth.

Armed with more confidence, Alex began to speak up in meetings: “That’s interesting. When I worked in health care, we used to look at the numbers this way. Would using that approach help us secure this new client?” Partners took note. They also picked up on the value her quantitative skills offered, and how her health care background and alumni network could introduce quality leads.

Similar to Alex, ask yourself: Based on what I learned in the following steps, what do I need to do to become visible at my organization? Who — internally or externally — can help me practice or prepare? More often than not, you’ll discover opportunities to showcase your value in collaborative group exercises or team meetings. In these settings, what can you offer that will help the stakeholders reach their goals?

2) To develop sponsors, seek advice. Slowly but surely, Alex was assigned a few key deals. The partners — one of whom chaired the annual promotion committee — depended on her, and frequently sought her out for updates. Through these interactions, she learned more about what mattered to each of them, and was able to act on that knowledge.

Her biggest accelerator, however, was securing a sponsor. Sponsors are powerful people within an organization who take deep interest in your career growth and actively go to bat for you behind closed doors. They submit your name for key

assignments, raise your name during succession planning committees, and sometimes even make the case for you to be the overpaid outlier at bonus time.

To convert one of the partners into a sponsor, Alex proactively sought his mentorship. She went out of her way to set up regular one-on-one meetings. She asked for his advice on how to secure internal resources for her role, something he was adept at. He offered her ongoing coaching, and impressed by her work, became invested in her success.

At your own organization, consider whether there is a stakeholder whom can do the same for you. To begin, seek out their advice on a topic they value. This strategy is particularly effective. Being sought out is flattering to most people. It shows that you're putting thought and effort into your work, and creates a bond akin to a partnership. At the same time, remember that one meeting won't magically turn someone into a sponsor. The first step is getting that powerful person to take an active interest in you. Then, be consistent.

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Let's shift back to the case of Alex: In six months, she was labelled "high potential." In a year, she was promoted — and had an attractive outside offer, as recruiters closely monitor rising talent. Instead of languishing and getting frustrated, Alex was in the driver's seat, and used her newfound influence to support her junior colleagues.

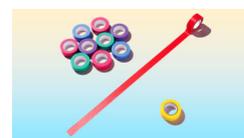
Alex's story illustrates the framework in action: Applying the skills highlighted above can fast track your career growth – and once you get things started, things will become easier, as you will have the force of powerful people supporting you.

Now it's your turn to get started. You're already doing great work. Make sure that you're taking the steps that will make that work visible. With the right mindset and focus, you *will* land that promotion, and it will be the first of many.

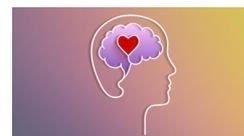
Michael Wenderoth is an Executive Coach who helps leaders ethically leverage power and politics to breakthrough and ascend. He is the author of *Get Promoted* and adjunct professor at IE Business School. Michael holds an MBA from the Stanford Graduate School of Business and trained as an executive coach at Columbia University (3CP). Connect with him on LinkedIn.

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