

Why You Didn't Get That Promotion

Decoding the unwritten rules of corporate advancement

YOU'VE BEEN PASSED over for a key promotion despite stellar results and glowing reviews. You've asked where you're falling short, but the responses have been vague and unsatisfying, leaving you angry, frustrated, and unsure of how to get ahead. Promotion decisions seem arbitrary and political. What's going on?

In most organizations, promotions are governed by unwritten rules – the often fuzzy, intuitive, and poorly expressed feelings of senior executives regarding individuals' ability to succeed in C-suite positions. As an aspiring executive, you might not know those rules, much less the specific skills you need to develop or demonstrate to follow them. The bottom line: You're left to your own devices in interpreting feedback and finding a way to achieve your career goals.

That's what happened to Ralph Thomas, the vice president of operations for Smith & Mullins's industrial products division, the company's largest operating group. (All names and identifying details in this article are disguised.) He wasn't blindsided by the announcement that Kelly Ferguson had been promoted to senior vice president and general manager for corporate markets – he'd been informed the week before. But Ralph had been a contender, and this was the second time in four years he'd missed out on a division GM job. The first time, Smith & Mullins had hired an outsider who later left the position for a major role at a rival firm.

Ralph always had excellent performance reviews. His 360 results indicated that people loved working for him, and as far as he could tell, managers across the company were

beating down the doors to join his group. In terms of execution, his track record was flawless: He and his team had met or surpassed their numbers in each of the past five years. Additionally, they had successfully implemented every major corporate program during that time, and his division had recently been selected to serve as the pilot site for an SAP installation. When he'd learned of these last two GM assignments, he'd also been told that he had a great future with the company and that with a little "seasoning," he'd be ready for advancement. He'd tried several times to get the real scoop on why he hadn't been promoted, only to hear vague comments about improving his "communication skills" and demonstrating more "executive presence" and "leadership." It seemed to him that the company valued people who could look and sound good in the boardroom more than it cared about the year-over-year results of proven performers like himself.

As for Kelly? She'd hired some top people in the past couple of years, but Ralph knew that she had a reputation for being tough on her reports and having "sharp elbows." To Ralph, the promotion wasn't much of an expression of the company's leadership competency model, posted on his office wall: "Display ethics and integrity, envision the future, deliver results, focus on customers, engage in teamwork and collaboration, and develop talent." Ralph bore Kelly no ill will, but it looked as though it was time to update his résumé and rekindle some relationships in his network. Distasteful as it was, testing the job market seemed to be the only way to advance.

The Unwritten Rules

Ralph's situation is surprisingly common, especially among people who aren't politically inclined. Few organizations spell out the criteria for advancement.

Though Ralph had been considered for the GM role both times, in each instance there were bona fide concerns about his readiness. The vague feedback

IDEA IN BRIEF

- **Decisions about who gets promoted can seem mysterious and arbitrary. Stellar performance reviews and a strong track record – and you still get passed over. What's going on?**
- **In most companies feedback is vague and confusing – sometimes intentionally, so as not to demoralize. It's up to you to ferret out the real reasons you're not getting the job.**
- **For example, think twice when you're told you need to work on "leadership" or gain more "seasoning." These can be code words masking more specific concerns, like a failure to demonstrate strategic thinking or an inability to delegate.**

about his communication skills actually alluded to tensions with peers in other units: He could be overly competitive and slow to resolve conflict, whereas Kelly's powers of persuasion allowed her to manage discord and achieve superior results. She was also known for developing talent. Working for her was not for the faint of heart, but she challenged her staff members, and they grew in the process. Ralph didn't recognize that his

Under the heading of "leadership" lurked questions regarding Ralph's strategic thinking. He was a go-to guy for implementing corporate initiatives, a master of continuous improvement. But senior management had seen no evidence of his ability to conceive a large-scale change that would produce a quantum leap in performance. Can strategic thinking be developed? That's open to debate, but the fact was that Ralph had always worked for visionaries who never gave him the chance to flex his own strategic muscles, a problem everyone had overlooked.

The information void wasn't a matter of malice; rather, it was due to assumptions that nobody thought to make explicit and an all-too-human reluctance to deliver bad news. Managers and HR professionals often provide intentionally vague feedback for fear of losing a good employee. Further, although most leadership competency models refer in some way to important management skills and attributes, they typically fail to distinguish nice-to-have from non-negotiable skills.

What's more, such models usually don't spell out how leadership skills should be demonstrated at different levels or how the relative importance of those qualities will change as you rise

Managers may provide vague feedback to avoid losing a good employee.

popularity reflected, in part, his reputation for being a little easy on people – he didn't stretch them to grow and develop. Managers flocking to his unit were often B players who knew he'd cut them some slack. He was luring talent that was good but not great; Kelly was attracting A players who wanted a push. The company's competency model included "develop talent" but didn't specify that having a track record for doing so was nonnegotiable for anyone who wanted to rise beyond Ralph's level.

in the hierarchy. For example, in middle management, teamwork – defined as the ability to maintain cohesion and morale within one's group – is a vital competency. At higher levels, where Ralph hopes to play, it matters less. In fact, at most companies, cohesion tends to fall short at senior levels thanks to rivalry and ego, but teams function pretty well nonetheless. Acquiring and developing talent is the executive's imperative, and teamwork becomes a nice-to-have. Ralph's ability to orchestrate

well-functioning teams to complete complex projects, among other skills, had singled him out for previous promotions. But when he was being considered for the GM jobs, strategic thinking became a much higher priority.

Many of the unwritten rules are especially hard to nail down because they don't pertain to technical ability, industry experience, or business knowledge. Rather, they relate to the "soft" skills that combine to give decision makers an intuitive sense of whether a candidate will succeed at the senior level. And, as predictable career paths become more or less extinct, the confusion for people seeking advancement just gets worse.

In my 30 years of experience in and observation of succession planning and executive development at large companies, I've found that the unwritten rules of C-suite placement decisions fall into three categories. *Nonnegotiables* are the fundamental factors without which an executive will not be considered for promotion. *Deselection factors* are characteristics that eliminate an otherwise qualified candidate from consideration. *Core selection factors* are what ultimately dictate promotion decisions. The exhibit "Key Factors in Executive Career Advancement" shows the model I've developed for senior managers. The factors may differ at your company, but the ones highlighted in the exhibit are pretty typical.

Ralph passes the test on the nonnegotiables and the deselection factors but falls short on several core selection factors, like thinking strategically, building a strong executive team, and having the organization savvy to work effectively across internal boundaries. If Smith & Mullins made a list of such factors available to its executives, along with a dose of constructive feedback, Ralph would probably be able to see where he needs to devote his energies.

But since it doesn't, Ralph has to tease out the underlying issues. Although he periodically gets feedback from 360s, such reviews – unless combined with confidential face-to-face interviews by a

third party – are rarely sufficient to illuminate the core reasons behind a stalled career.

One obvious way to get insight is to approach your boss and colleagues directly for their opinions, though their input might be of limited use. They may not be straight with you, and their perspectives may differ from those of the

most senior decision makers. For additional information, you might have a conversation with your former manager or your boss's boss. Try to contact the highest-level manager who is knowledgeable about your work and with whom you have a positive relationship, so your approach seems natural and appropriate. (Caveat: Don't go behind

Key Factors in Executive Career Advancement

Nonnegotiables

Factors that are absolutely necessary for you to be a contender

- Demonstrating consistently strong performance
- Displaying ethics, integrity, and character
- Being driven to lead and to assume higher levels of responsibility

Deselection Factors

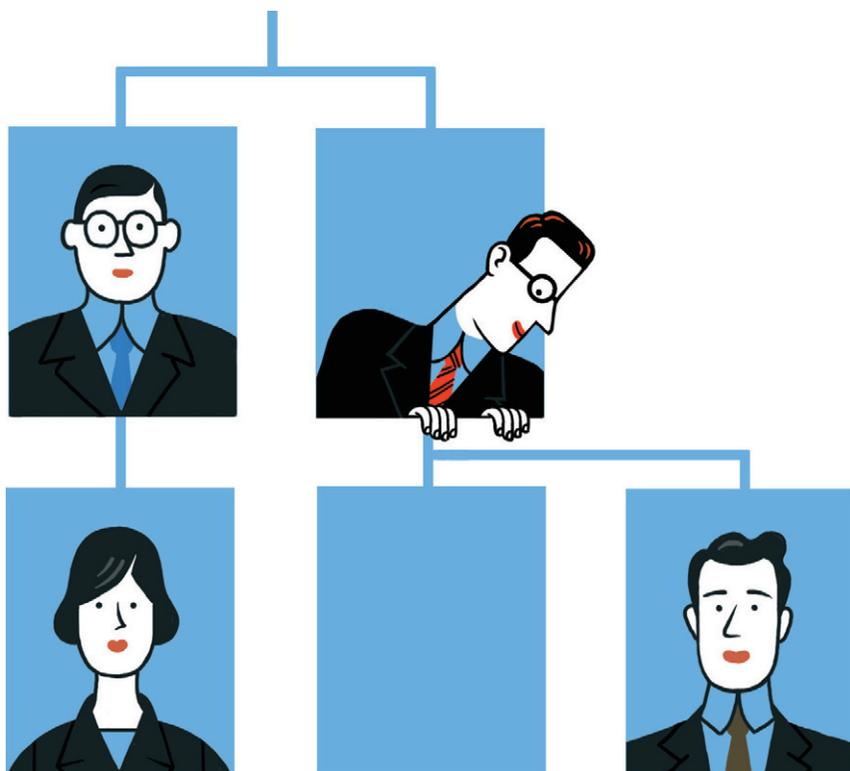
Characteristics that prevent you from being considered as a serious candidate

- Having weak interpersonal skills
- Treating others with insensitivity or abrasiveness
- Putting self-interest above company good
- Holding a narrow, parochial perspective on the business and the organization

Core Selection Factors

Capabilities that breed others' confidence in your ability to succeed at the senior executive level

- Setting direction and thinking strategically; spotting marketplace trends and developing a winning strategy that differentiates the company
- Building and continually upgrading a strong executive team; having a "nose for talent"; establishing an adequate level of team cohesion
- Managing implementation without getting involved at too low a level of detail; defining a set of roles, processes, and measures to ensure that things get done reliably
- Building the capacity for innovation and change; knowing when new ways of doing business are required; having the courage, tolerance for risk, and change-management skills to bring new ideas to fruition
- Getting things done across internal boundaries (lateral management); demonstrating organization savvy; influencing and persuading colleagues; dealing well with conflict
- Growing and developing as an executive; soliciting and responding to feedback; adjusting leadership style in light of experience



Changing deep-seated perceptions of you takes visible and consistent effort.

your boss's back. He or she should know about any contact with other executives and what your intentions are.) For the reasons stated above, you'll probably have to dig a little to get useful information. That's not easy, so let's take a closer look at how you can go about having a truly constructive conversation.

How to Ask, How to Listen

Getting past executives' reluctance to provide direct and difficult feedback is tricky. When asking for input, project a sincere desire to understand what's holding you back – and avoid appearing to lobby or argue. Your core question should be “What skills and capabilities do I need to demonstrate in order to be a strong candidate for higher levels of responsibility at some point in the future?”

Get into active-listening mode. Any comment or body language that conveys defensiveness will most likely cause the other person to either clam up or move the conversation to easier (and vaguer) territory – such as the need for more “seasoning” that Ralph kept hearing about. Ask clarifying questions, but don't challenge the content. (You can attempt to correct factual errors with the right person later; this isn't the time.) Be alert to code words and phrases masking fundamental issues – general observations about the need for “increased leadership ability” or “better teamwork” or “improved communication.”

For instance, a manager I'll call Terry was told by her boss that she needed to improve her leadership skills before she'd be eligible for her next promotion. She was managing multiple initia-

tives, and her teams were functioning effectively; she didn't see how to improve her leadership except by taking on more projects. Fortunately, she had worked for her boss's manager earlier in her career and could set up a meeting. In a series of probing questions, she asked the manager to help her define what “better leadership” would be in her case. She discovered that in her dedication she in fact had been doing herself a disservice. She'd been given an ever-increasing number of projects because of her superior organizational and people-management skills and her ability to stay on top of details. However, senior managers were concerned that she was maxed out by her personal involvement in every initiative and wanted to see that she could delegate more and create processes and systems that would ensure flawless execution without so much direct supervision.

In response she put considerable effort into rethinking how she spent her time: which issues she should be involved in personally, which she could – with some coaching – learn to delegate to others, and what kinds of meetings and reports would allow her to stay as close to projects as was needed. She revamped her team's staff meeting and the level of preparation required. She also designated a direct report as chief of staff to follow up on deadlines and alert her to situations that required her intervention. Terry admits that it was initially difficult to extricate herself from the details on some projects and confesses to poring over the status reports submitted by the staff. But with practice she got better at letting go. A year later she was promoted to lead a large operational unit.

Things don't always work out so well. Ed, a highly proficient finance manager, had advanced quickly because of his technical knowledge but recently missed out on several key promotions. His boss told him not to worry, everything was fine. Still, Ed met with his unit's HR manager, who advised him to improve his communication skills. This confused him;

he took pride in his ability to write and speak clearly and devoted a lot of time to communicating with his staff. At the suggestion of the HR manager, he met with three peers to get their opinions. All three were hesitant to offer their opinions until Ed probed specifically for examples of poor communication on his part. It turned out that he was right; his basic communication skills were fine. Rather, the underlying issue lay with his ability to listen and to be flexible. Colleagues complained that he tended to get locked into his own opinions, that he lacked openness to other perspectives and shut down creative alternatives. Some considered him arrogant.

Overall, his peers recommended that Ed spend more time discussing his plans with them and soliciting input. Unfortunately, Ed saw this as “politics” and energy that would be diverted from getting things done. Exacerbating the situation was the fact that Ed’s boss was encouraging him to drive the implementation of a new corporate policy that Ed’s peers found onerous. When his boss took a new position within the company, Ed

suddenly felt vulnerable. Using his extensive industry network, he quickly found another position with a well-regarded firm but ended up leaving his new job after only nine months. The official reason was that Ed was not a cultural fit in a highly collaborative environment. In reality Ed’s peers at the new company complained that he was a know-it-all who tried to sell major initiatives to his boss without taking the time to understand how the organization worked and what internal customers needed.

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If you are having trouble decoding the feedback you receive, try asking at the end of each session, “What one or two things – above all others – would most build confidence in my ability to succeed at higher levels within the organization?” As long as the other person answers honestly, this question tends to circumvent vagueness and separate the wheat from the chaff.

Keep in mind that changing deep-seated perceptions about you, formed over years, requires visible and consistent effort – which is why it is typically

best to focus on one or two key areas of development. Think through whether your current position provides you with a platform to demonstrate needed skills. Ralph, for instance, may need to move to a position where his breakthrough thinking isn’t preempted by a visionary boss. Alternatively, he may find ample opportunities to exhibit strategic thinking in his current role – if he is aggressive and creative in pursuing them and his boss gives him room to experiment.

Although this type of development isn’t easy, the payoff can be huge for both the individual and the organization. Employees like Ralph learn what’s really holding them back, and companies like Smith & Mullins get a deeper and better bench. 

John Beeson (jbeeson100@aol.com) is the principal of Beeson Consulting, which specializes in succession planning, executive development, and organization design. He is based in New York.

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