

THE UNWRITTEN RULES

THE **6** SKILLS
YOU NEED TO GET PROMOTED
TO THE EXECUTIVE LEVEL

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Navigating Career Dilemmas

If you're a talented, ambitious, and hard-working manager, you have every reason to assume that your career will be an up arrow. However, the higher you go in a company, the more competition there is for fewer slots and the more organizational realities come into play. In attempting to accomplish their career goals, aspiring executives like you often run into some difficult yet predictable career challenges. Having observed C-suite-level promotion decisions over the years, I would alert you to four especially knotty issues successful executives must navigate:

1. Keeping your ambition in balance with your commitment to the company
2. Dealing with a bad boss
3. Addressing a blockage situation

4. Deciding whether to stay with your company or seek greener pastures elsewhere

If you can successfully deal with dilemmas such as these, you'll be in a better position to accomplish your long-term career goals.

BALANCING AMBITION AND COMPANY COMMITMENT

In describing the unwritten rules in Chapter One, I highlighted several nonnegotiables and deselection factors. The nonnegotiable factors—the capabilities you must display to be considered as a candidate for the executive level—include your drive to lead and assume higher levels of responsibility. Central to that drive is a strong sense of ambition. That's the motor that makes you want to succeed and step up to the pressure that goes with the territory at the executive level. Realize that one of the deselection factors, putting self-interest above the good of the company, can create a potential conflict if your ambition to advance is not managed carefully. To be able to deal with this tension, you'll need to ensure that your motivation to succeed personally is never out of balance with the company's interests. You'll also have to be sensitive to your company's culture and its level of comfort with expressions of ambition.

In some companies, *ambition* is a dirty word—meaning that overt ambition is not well regarded. In other companies, people’s drive to get ahead is not only expected, it’s considered a positive trait. If you work for a company that is uncomfortable with direct expressions of ambition, you may have to couch your comments about promotion with some caveats—for example, stating your desire to advance to the executive level in terms like “at some time in the future,” “under the right set of circumstances,” or “assuming that I continue to perform and grow as a leader.” In your career discussions, make sure you successfully communicate your career goals to the right people: those who can help you advance toward your career objectives or recommend you for the positions that will help you achieve them. Just make sure you convey your career goals in a manner consistent with your company’s attitudes about ambition.

Regardless of your company’s level of comfort with expressions of ambition, make a point of projecting a sense that your drive to succeed is fully in line with the interests of the company. In order to maintain the trust of the organization, you need to ensure that the actions you take are consistent with the company’s goals so people are confident that you won’t jeopardize the interests of the company for your own personal advancement. If you are able to do that on a day-to-day basis—and reinforce it in your career

planning discussions—others will see you as an up-and-coming manager, the kind the company can rely on to lead it into the future.

DEALING WITH A BAD BOSS

It's a virtual certainty that at some point in your career you'll have a bad boss. Bad bosses come in a number of varieties, including the incompetent, insensitive, indecisive, and unfair. Some are meddling micromanagers. Some fold under pressure. Others may exhibit borderline or even blatantly unethical behavior. And some may be uninterested in your career progress or, worse, try to thwart it.

Interestingly, in their landmark study, *The Lessons of Experience: How Successful Executives Develop on the Job*, Morgan McCall, Michael Lombardo, and Ann Morrison found that having a bad boss was actually one of a future leader's most important development experiences.¹ Bad bosses helped the leaders studied learn approaches they didn't want to emulate as well as the fact that any manager will have shortcomings.

Dealing with a difficult manager is clearly a problem since your boss is a major factor in your ability to perform well in your job. And by virtue of his role, your boss should be a source of career feedback and support. Many managers with a bad boss adopt a "this too shall pass" attitude and try to wait it out until either they or the boss moves on to another assignment. Sometimes the relationship

with the boss becomes so intense they are driven to risky extremes, like going to the boss's boss to demand that the manager be removed. Or they may jump ship and take a job with another company—frequently with negative consequences.

Realize that going to your boss's boss or a third party like HR rarely leads to a resolution in the short term. It's difficult for an individual subordinate to dislodge a boss, and your manager may have some special ability his boss values enough to tolerate what you see as poor management. Examples include a close relationship with an important customer or specific expertise the boss's boss lacks.

Since it's rare for a bad boss situation to be resolved overnight, I suggest you take some time and try to analyze the situation—especially if your relationship with the boss is causing strong emotions on your part. Use the techniques I discussed in Chapter Seven to build strong, positive working relationships with others. What are your boss's goals and interests? What does he value? How does he take in information (reading, verbally, in highly detailed reports)? How does he make decisions? By helping your boss achieve her goals and communicating in a way consistent with her preferred style, you are in a position to make a bad relationship at least acceptable for the time you report to her.

If your boss is being a micromanager, check to see if the area is new to him. Have you been able to establish

your credibility with your boss as a reliable performer and team member? As we've observed, some bosses are chronic micromanagers who never give their people enough rope to do their jobs. Others loosen the reins once they've developed confidence in a direct report and feel they are getting the information they need to avoid being surprised.

Some direct reports try to stonewall a micromanager to show they are capable of running their own shop. I suggest you do the opposite. Especially if your boss is not well versed in your area, offer to educate her on the issues your department is dealing with. Ask what information she would like you to provide and what issues she's most interested in being informed about. On occasion—not always—your efforts to initiate communications will build the manager's confidence in you, and she'll begin to back off. Conversely, try to identify your boss's base of knowledge and expertise and convey a desire to learn from her. Sometimes when the boss feels valued, it helps you begin to build a relationship.

Importantly, don't allow yourself to get demoralized or drawn into commiserating with others about your boss. That will only cause you to take your eye off performing your job. Try to maintain your sense of professionalism and patience. Make sure your boss knows about your career goals and the conversations you've had with other executives about future career plans. Your boss may or may not agree with your career goals. However, informing your boss about past conversations makes it

easier to continue your career discussions with other executives since it doesn't appear as if you're going around him. You have to be careful, but let those executives know of your interest in pursuing reassignment options—and sooner rather than later. Unless you know an executive well, avoid criticizing your boss directly, but let your tone communicate your strong desire to move on to the next developmental assignment. Sometimes an uptick in your sense of urgency to take on a new job will let others know it's time for them to intervene.

In some cases—and with the right steps on your part—a relationship with a bad boss will improve. Other times you or the boss will move on to other assignments. At the extreme you'll be forced to consider whether the experience is so negative you need to leave the company for another job. If you get to that point, I suggest you pay special attention to the “When the Grass Is Greener” section in this chapter.

ADDRESSING A BLOCKAGE SITUATION

You may have set your sights on a higher-level position on your path to advancement but find that position blocked by a long-tenured manager who doesn't look to be going anywhere soon. That manager may be a solid, if unspectacular, performer—someone with considerable institutional knowledge who is viewed as a rock of stability in the midst of organizational change—or someone preparing for retirement in a few years.

If you are confronted with this situation, my first suggestion is that you realize that many paths lead to career advancement. Although the position you've targeted may seem to be an ideal fit, this may be exactly the time in your career for a lateral move to another function or business unit within the company. If you do consider this kind of assignment, all of the conditions outlined for a lateral move in Chapter Nine still apply. However, if you can successfully engage the right group of executives, you may be able to gain an invaluable two to three years of experience and qualify yourself for higher-level positions you've never even thought of.

If you are viewed as a top performer your company wants to invest in, I've seen companies take highly creative steps to deal with a situation such as this—especially if it involves a manager who is interested in moving toward retirement. So if you spot an impending blockage situation, make a point to initiate a series of career discussions. Be sure to let others know the kinds of experiences you would find attractive and your level of flexibility in taking on a new assignment. For example, can you relocate? Is it feasible for you to consider an international assignment for a few years? By focusing on the kinds of experiences you'd like to have (a global assignment, a position close to the customer), and not just specific positions, you give the company more freedom to develop new options, perhaps creating a new position that doesn't currently exist. In the process, you can increase your skill level and make yourself

an even stronger candidate for an executive-level position in the future.

WHEN THE GRASS IS GREENER: TO STAY OR LEAVE?

Most managers find bumps along their road in advancing to the C-suite level. Early in people's careers, promotions tend to come relatively quickly, but as you go higher up in the company, the pace of advancement usually slows. What's your situation? Perhaps you've been passed over for a promotion you thought should have come to you. Or you sense that your peers are moving ahead in their careers faster than you are. This raises an important question: Is it better to look outside your company to accomplish your career goals—or hope for the best where you are? It's not an easy question, and it demands a lot of thought on your part to get the answer right.

We've all seen managers who have left for greener pastures and had their careers take off. And you've probably witnessed your company hire people from the outside who achieve considerable success. However, moving to a new company in order to advance your career can be a slippery slope. Research on this topic is somewhat elusive, but most of the data I've seen suggest that the failure rate of those hired from the outside at the manager and executive levels is somewhere between 40 and 50 percent after twelve to eighteen months—and it probably exceeds 50 percent two years after hire.² That means you have, on average, a one

out of two chance of things working out with a new company. Although looking outside your company to move forward in your career is not without risk, there are times when it makes sense to hit the escape hatch, especially if you take steps to shift the odds in your favor.

If you are concerned that your career progress is lagging, my first recommendation won't come as a surprise: contact those in your company who can provide you with the feedback that really counts. It's vital to know how you are perceived by those responsible for executive-level placements in your organization so you can plan accordingly. Too often I've seen managers get frustrated about not getting ahead in one company and jump ship to another—and then run afoul of the same issues that held them back in their prior organization. Examples include trouble collaborating with peers (which impedes your ability to work effectively across organization lines) or exhibiting deselection factors such as arrogance or insensitivity or taking a narrow, parochial perspective on the business.

As a rule of thumb, it's usually easier to tackle issues like these in your current company where you know the business and the other players. Don't underestimate the challenges of addressing them when you join a new organization. In assuming a job with a new company, there's a lot of pressure to learn the ropes in your new job, develop a new set of relationships, and show you can produce results. For most of us, stress tends to bring out our worst

tendencies, so if there are aspects of your leadership or interpersonal style you need to work on, it's usually better to do it in your current job.

That said, there are times when you should explore the outside job market to identify other companies where you can increase your pace of career advancement. It's probably time to consider moving on if you confront these situations:

- You've been passed over multiple times and have not received feedback and guidance about the skills you need to display to move ahead in the future.
- You're locked in your current job by long-tenured people above you within the organization. If you have been unsuccessful in engineering a lateral move for development and have expressed your desire to see your career grow, the organization may implicitly be telling you that it's quite happy to see you continue in your current role.
- You've made a concerted effort to address the feedback you've received (for example, a need to rebuild the trust of your peers and coworkers), and you have not been successful in changing people's perceptions. It's a sad truth of organizational life that sometimes you have so much baggage from the past that it's virtually impossible to get people to see you in a new light, your best efforts notwithstanding.

If you are facing any of these situations, it's probably best to look at other companies, especially those with the kind of culture where you can succeed. In considering any new job, make sure you take the time to research the company thoroughly—its business, strategy, and culture—to determine if it's a fit for you in the long term. To do so, you'll need to go beyond what you pick up during the interview process. That tends to be an audition where both you and the company want to look your best.

If you've been successful in developing a strong network outside your company, this is the time to access it for information about a potential employer. Using your network, try to connect with former managers who worked for the company in the recent past. Assuming they will level with you, you'll get more candid insight into the company's culture and any political issues you may be walking into than you will from the company's recruiters. Dig deep to get a sense of how the company's culture matches your values. Is it a culture that promotes collaboration and collegiality or speed, urgency, and an individual's ability to put points on the board quickly? Is it highly innovative and fast moving, or does it value slow, methodical progress? Think carefully about what type of culture plays to your strengths.

If you've done this kind of due diligence and the job is right, you may have found a great fit for the long term. To maximize your chances of success, though, don't stop your developmental efforts when you walk through the door that first day on the new job. Find people in the new

company who can provide you with early feedback over the first three or four months. If people are misinterpreting your intentions or see any behaviors on your part that go against the company's cultural grain, you'll want to know early on. That way you're in a position to take corrective action and make your partnership with the new company a good one.

Let me end on a cautionary note. A number of studies have looked at the factors that lie behind a manager's success or failure when joining a new company.³ It's usually best to be moving *to* a new opportunity—as opposed to moving *away from* a poor job situation. So before you hit the escape button, I suggest you take the mirror test. Look candidly and objectively to identify what's holding you back in your company. If the reasons you're not getting ahead relate to the unwritten rules described in this book, more often than not, you'll find it easier to address them in your current organization. And by doing so, you'll avoid being part of the 50 percent of executives who don't succeed if and when you decide to join a new company.

THE REALITIES OF CAREER NAVIGATION

When senior executives talk about their careers, especially in public settings, they often mention how lucky they were to be in the right place at the right time. To some extent, they're being honest. Some of an executive's greatest career opportunities come her way unexpectedly and at favorable

times. But don't be fooled entirely. Opportunities usually come your way as the result of hard work and preparation. Successful executives hone their skills in the course of their careers. And they learn—sometimes the hard way—to navigate the career obstacles they must face in order to make wise decisions along the way. You can't make the ideal job open up exactly when you want it. But by learning how to have productive career discussions with the right people and, in the process, teasing out feedback about any underlying concerns about your skills relative to the core selection factors, you'll be surprised by how often good things come your way.