

# Positioning Yourself For Promotion

## How to use higher-ups to move up the ladder

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You're ready to move up. Perhaps you've even taken some first steps, such as making your wishes known to others in the company, or putting feelers out for advancement opportunities. What now?

There's more than you might think to the art of strategically positioning yourself for promotion. With many hiring decisions today made by more than one person—particularly in larger companies—employees need to make themselves “promotable” and present themselves accordingly.

Read on for some recommendations on promotion-positioning etiquette and how higher-ups can help you get the job you deserve.

### Learn “Boss Basics”

Though your immediate supervisor isn't the only one who can help you get promoted, your boss is a key person whose help you should leverage. While you may recognize the importance of articulating what you can do for your company if you get promoted, don't forget showing your boss how your promotion could help him or her.

“Obviously you need to know the benefit to the company in promoting you specifically,” says Barry Maher, author of *Filling the Glass: The Skeptic's Guide to Positive Thinking in Business*. “But what's almost as important, you should be able to show a benefit to the people who will be making or recommending the promotion. How is giving you that promotion going to advance their interests? In simple terms, if you want them on your side, what's in it for them?”

Executive and leadership coach Susan Foster advises managing two levels up to help accomplish this. “Find out what’s important to your manager—what his or her bosses’ priorities are,” says Foster. “These become your priorities when accomplishing your tasks. Don’t miss an opportunity to let your boss know when one of these priorities is impacted.”

To position yourself for future promotions, Maher also recommends sending a short note to your boss at the end of each week to keep him or her apprised of your weekly accomplishments. “Come evaluation time, the boss may well use those notes to help write the evaluation,” says Maher. “And at the very least, you’ll have all that ammunition when it’s time to talk about that next promotion or raise.”

But before you send a note, Foster suggests first finding out how your manager wants to be kept informed, as some managers may prefer to receive updates via email or in person rather than through written notes. “Never let your boss be surprised,” says Foster. “Communicating in the style they prefer will help ensure they are listening. If possible, when reporting an issue, have a recommendation handy on how to proceed.”

### **Use the Mentor-Sponsor Approach**

Many career experts advocate using mentoring and sponsorship as strategic approaches to career advancement—especially for women.

Alison Martin-Books, founder of Mentoring Women’s Network and author of *Landing on My Feet: Learning to Lead Through Mentoring*, found that formulating mentoring relationships with others in her organization helped her to become one of the youngest executive directors of a large nonprofit.

“My ability to be promotable was in part due to my alignment with individuals who were interested in seeing me grow professionally,” says Martin-Books. She suggests women look for three key traits in a potential mentor: compassion, honesty, and demonstrated success in their area of expertise.

Along with developing strong mentoring relationships, sponsorship is another avenue for women to consider as a stepping stone to their next promotion. In a recent report *Sponsoring Women to Success*, Catalyst states: “While mentoring is essential for leadership development, it is insufficient for advancing to top levels. Recent research has pointed to a more influential and specific professional relationship: sponsorship.”

Catalyst’s report found that sponsorship is “key to advancing high performers and gives them greater opportunities to excel through skill development and increased visibility.” The study also found that sponsorship acts as a “differentiator” at the top rungs of an organization, and a means to helping women overcome corporate barriers.

Doris Braun, CEO of Leadership Solutions for Women, agrees that the “easiest” way to be promoted is to have a sponsor within your organization. Before creating her company, Braun spent 25 years in banking, most recently working on Wall Street for

Deutsche Bank. She notes that her career on Wall Street “flourished” when she had sponsors and was “close to stagnant” when she didn’t have one.

“This person is senior to you and says the right things about you to their peers when you are *not* in the room,” says Braun. “They are also able to get you assigned to visible projects, which will allow you to interact with people who are in a position to promote you.” Braun adds that sponsors can help grease the wheels and groom you for promotion by getting you a seat at the table in key meetings, committees, and other venues at which you might otherwise lack access.

### **Ask for Direction**

Spreading the word about your desire to be promoted isn’t enough, some career experts say. In fact, requesting a promotion without proving to your higher-ups why you deserve one can be the wrong approach. What’s the right one? Proving that you can do what’s needed to take a step up.

“Once you’ve established a relationship with a person of power, don’t tell them that you want to be promoted,” says Joseph Terach, CEO of career services and workplace coaching firm Resume Deli. “Rather, ask them what you need to do in order to be promoted. Then do it.”

Katie Donovan, founder of Equal Pay Negotiations LLC, adds that she used a similar strategy to get into graduate school—and it worked. She has thus continued to ask for direction and feedback during job interviews and when preparing for promotions.

“I would invite people in power such as my manager to give me true critical and actionable direction regarding what I was doing well and where I needed to improve or expand my experience,” says Donovan. “In work the question is, ‘What do I need to do to make it impossible for you not to promote me?’ Once you get an answer, then start doing those things. The second you achieve the items is the second you go back and say, ‘I’m ready for that promotion.’”

### **Go Beyond Your To-Do List**

As companies continue to condense staff and ask more of their employees, it can be difficult to dig out from your task list to actively plan a career strategy that prepares you for promotion. This is especially true for women who have many demands outside the workplace, according to JJ DiGeronimo, president of career and leadership strategy firm Purposeful Woman. “Often women are just trying to get done what is on their to-do list,” she says.

But focusing on your to-dos while neglecting the strategic aspect of earning a promotion can be a mistake. “Working hard all of the time—e.g., ‘I don’t have time to go to lunch’—is *not* the way to get promoted,” says Terach. “Be friendly with the people in power. This means going to company events, impromptu lunches, etc.”

DiGeronimo notes that another effective way to position yourself for promotion is to focus on a desired skill with the goal to be an expert. “Find something that is in demand and work to learn everything you can about it,” she says. “Strive toward being the go-to for this topic.”

Going beyond your to-do list also means accepting that you cannot get everything done and that you need to prioritize, according to executive coach Elene Cafasso of Enerpace, Inc. “No human being can do it all,” says Cafasso. “Now given that, what are the three to four priorities that will drive your business/create the results you’ll be held accountable for? Do those things first. Communicate freely and often about those things so you’ll be seen as a person getting results for the business and strategically in tune enough to know what’s important.”

### **Keep It Up**

It can be tempting to go the extra mile only when you’re seeking a promotion. But a better approach, advises Deborah Sweeney, CEO of MyCorporation.com, is to come to work every day like you’re being evaluated for a promotion.

“Being a business owner now myself, I realize that the bosses are always watching; the little stuff never goes unnoticed,” says Sweeney. “And we don’t just watch come time for year-end reviews—we take notice all year long. So don’t slack when you think no one’s watching and turn it up just when you have a big presentation. Have your game face on every day, and you will certainly be rewarded.”

### About Robin Madell



Robin Madell has spent over two decades as a corporate writer, journalist, and communications consultant on business, leadership, career, health, finance, technology, and public-interest issues. She is a contributing writer to U.S. News & World Report and serves as a copywriter, speechwriter, and ghostwriter for executives and entrepreneurs across diverse industries. She has served on the Board of Directors of the Healthcare Businesswomen’s Association in New York and San Francisco. Robin is the author of *Surviving Your Thirties: Americans Talk About Life After 30* and co-author of *The Strong Principles: Career Success*.