



# How Do I Respond To "How Do I Get Promoted?"

Directs are going to ask how they can get promoted. Rather than get frustrated, give them a professional answer.

The media today would have us all believe that millennials are different, because they're asking much sooner, "how can I get promoted?" and, "when can I get promoted?" This is met with consternation, because they should know better, they should trust the organizational process, because they ought to know they're not ready.

All of this is silly, because directs have been asking that *for decades*. And if they're asking, it means they don't know...and their manager would be the one to tell them.

## Outline

1. It's a Fair And Even A GOOD Question
2. "I'm glad you asked"
3. It Starts With Significant Results
4. Build Great Relationships
5. Explain The Process

## Shownotes

### 1. It's a Fair And Even A GOOD Question.

The common response from managers to this question is negative. There's some resentment: *if you were ready to get promoted, the organization would have promoted you!* There's also disappointment: *don't you know how hard it is?* There's also some frustration: *don't you trust that I'm taking care of that because it's my responsibility?*

But all of this takes a negative view of the situation. This is a fair question of any manager.

Nobody gets a class on how promotions work.

And it's a good question too! Think about it: who, among any team, is most likely to get promoted? *The best or nearly best performers.. **Why would we NOT want everyone on our team to try to become our best or nearly best performer?*** If the downside of that is that we have the difficult task of letting some know they won't get promoted, that's a *trivial* negative that goes with the enormous positive of everyone on our team significantly improving their performance.

To a smart manager, a discussion about promotion is a discussion about improving performance. Let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Let's not be offered a Ferrari, and then complain that we already have a small car. Let's not complain about the weight of gold bars someone hands us.

What's more, nobody is told, *you will get a promotion if you do these things*. Our directs legitimately do not know how to get promoted. Our experience is that there are two factors that contribute to their lack of knowledge.

The first factor is that promotion processes are undocumented. Our directs who ask are wondering legitimately how the whole thing works. There's nothing wrong with that. Now, what they probably don't know is that no organization ever lays out a clear measurable way to a promotion.

And there are reasons for that, too. For one thing, different roles would require different criteria. And the criteria would be ever-changing based on who their boss is, what the mission of their division is, what's most valuable in the marketplace, etc., etc., etc. As the saying goes, when the railroad station manager was asked whether a train was due to be on time, he said, "that depends." When he was asked what it depended upon, he replied, "that, too, depends."

Even if someone performs exceptionally (and that is obviously the biggest factor), if organizational performance in the market is lagging, promotions are less likely. How are you going to write that into a measurable process?

For another, while promotions are an obvious vehicle for growth in most directs' career planning, promotions are only part of how the organization sees its structure. Corporate

structures *are much more fluid than most of us realize*. Senior execs running divisions have great latitude in reshaping their org to maximize effectiveness and productivity, and therefore profitability.

Even if someone is a top performer, *ever-changing market conditions mean an ever-changing internal promotion marketplace*. Even if a manager leaves, the organization doesn't reflexively fill that role with a promotion. There may be a reason to restructure. And *that* doesn't mean that someone wasn't ready, even if those who were wanting the open role may take it that way.

The second factor is that most directs *are getting far too little performance communications from us, their managers*. Forget about whether you're using the Manager Tools Feedback Model. Overall, performance communications are one of the core weaknesses of every organization we've ever seen. Even organizations famous for direct, candid performance comms are nowhere near the limit of what most directs want.

We certainly recognize that getting this question from a poor performer is much more likely to lead to a more challenging conversation. It's true that this glass is less than half full, where it might be mostly full for a high performer but still problematic. But we would encourage managers to still talk about the path with the idea that the path is predicated on improved performance, as we will lay out. You might also choose at that point to be candid that it will be harder for them than others, because performance is relative.

We might say, "Well, it's always good to get questions like that. That means you want to improve your performance, and I'll walk you through what that might look like. And, I'd be remiss if I didn't tell you that your road is a tougher one."

Most managers quickly see that this conversation is much harder if we haven't provided the nitty gritty, daily, weekly, monthly performance communications so that this assessment isn't a surprise.

## **2. "I'm glad you asked".**

Hopefully we've encouraged you to change from seeing this conversation as a negative about chances to a positive about improvement.

The right way to start positively is to say, "I'm glad you asked!"

You might continue:

*The road to a promotion always starts with high, even stellar performance. That's not everything, but it is the first thing. It's possible, as I'll show you, that you don't need to be the #1 performer to grow your responsibilities. But all other things being equal - which they never are (ATBEWTNA) - performance rules. Let's walk through both the general criteria, and how our organization handles the process, as best I can explain.*

### **3. It Starts With Significant Results.**

We all know this. Performance is the 900 pound gorilla for promotion. Our directs know it too. Those who think there's some secret sauce that's more important need to be quickly dissuaded. Their suspicions are wrong, but probably based on some poor conclusions and gossip that you'll never stop.

Here's how it might sound:

*The first rule of getting promoted nearly everywhere is performance rules. You have to do the job you're in now exceptionally well. You have to do it well enough that even when someone who doesn't know you well - like a peer of my boss - sees it, their eyebrows will go up.*

*A way to think about this is making this paragraph of your resume chock full of outstanding accomplishments. Bullets that say you were the best. Performance improvements of double digits, and more. Special projects that produced measurable improvements in our results, the division's numbers.*

*Of course it's rare to do something at our level that moves the needle for the entire firm, but that would be smashing. Accomplishment after accomplishment, with results that are singular, and that make a difference that can be perceived by those who don't do what we do.*

*The benefit of this kind of success is that even if you don't get promoted at the first opportunity, there are three knock-on effects worth noting. First, you're that much better prepared for your next promotion opportunity here. Second, you're much more valuable to other promotion opportunities in the organization. Don't assume that a narrow upward path is the only path. It's perhaps the most obvious, but there are plenty of other*

*opportunities for growth if you can move elsewhere. And those moves are made possible through performance.*

*The third outcome may not sound appealing, but it's important. If you perform exceptionally, and you don't take a step up, you're making your resume that much stronger for an external move. I'm not encouraging that, but I know it's often in folks' minds. The worst thing that can happen here is you don't know this, don't get promoted, and then discover that even if we don't look at your resume internally, externally they will. And if you don't have exceptional performance, moving up a level when you change companies is a tough move. In fact, moving to management in company B from a non-management role in Company A is considered a bridge too far. Every other "over AND up" move is notably harder than a lateral... but over AND up AND into management is exceptionally rare.*

*And let's be clear about what type of results I'm talking about. You'll get a lot of credit for being good at tasks that are expected of folks at your level, no question. But that's not nearly enough. You have to have noteworthy results on challenging and preferably visible projects - those known by and which have interest taken in them by more senior folks.*

*You have to be good at the easy stuff, but that's not enough. You have to be great at the hard stuff too.*

*And keep in mind that you can't go after special stuff **at the expense of** your normal work. It's not an either/or situation. Meet your deadlines. Show up on time. Meet your goals. Know your most important metrics, and track them. Proactively report on them. Communicate in advance of a miss, with a plan for how you're going to fix it.*

*And gosh be open to feedback. To get promoted, you're going to have to get better. Everybody always talks about "getting better" but then seems to forget that that means changing how you do things.*

*And that means accepting feedback graciously and eagerly. We managers get really tired of the folks who want to grow, but then respond to every bit of negative feedback with an explanation of why they did what they did. Even if you don't think you have a tone of defensiveness when you do that, defending the actions you took is seen as defensiveness. That says you think you're right, and me and my peers are going to roll our eyes and not believe you want to grow.*

*Look: you're responsible for results, but what you do is behavior. Sometimes the best behaviors produce the wrong results. Maybe you think what you DID was right, and maybe I would too. **But what you DID doesn't matter.** What matters are the results the organization received. Defending behaviors misses the darned point. Think of it this way: a behavior is only right if the results it produces are right. Defending behaviors that produces wrong results shows professional immaturity.*

*So ask for feedback. When it's negative, don't defend. Just say thanks. Go back and ask yourself what you could have DONE differently to get better RESULTS. And by the way, if you say thanks, I'm much more likely to give you more, and you'll get more used to it, and it won't be such a gosh darn big deal every time. If you defend, I'm going to subconsciously choose to give you less.*

*Now that's just the stuff that's normal at your level. You have to show that you can do stuff at MY level. We've previously encouraged professionals to earn their boss's respect so well that their boss gives them as much as 50% of the boss's job to do at various times. So you're going to have to ask me to delegate to you, and have me say yes. To be clear, asking isn't enough. I won't say yes if I don't think it's a good possibility you can handle it. You have to earn the right to be delegated to.*

*Now, to do all of this, you're going to have to do more than you're doing now. I don't mean longer hours necessarily. You'll have to be more efficient at what you're already doing, with similar results. That allows you the time for accepting delegation, and it also allows you to volunteer for projects and special assignments.*

*Sometimes people think that they need go off on their own and come up with something really great in order to get noticed. That's certainly possible. But it's a risky path if someone's special pet project takes time away from exceptional results in these other areas. Usually, working on organizational projects is a better path. Projects and delegations will make it easier to build relationships, especially when compared to thinking you need to go off on your own to create some earth-shattering idea. Nothing against earth-shattering, but again, it's risky.*

*Put all of that together - and it's a lot - and you're in the realm of significant results - the most important aspect of promotability.*

## 4. Build Great Relationships.

The two watchwords of a great career are results and relationships. We've got to make that clear to someone who wants to get promoted, but may overplay results at the expense of their reputation.

Here's how it might sound:

*As Proverbs says, "with all thy getting, get understanding". Yes, results are the most important component of promotability. But they cannot come at the expense of any of the others.*

*You have to create your significant results while also strengthening your connections with others. You can't use people to get what you want. If you think you can take from a relationship without giving, you're right. But the delta is a reduced relationship. That's not sustainable in any organization. Those relationships are crucial to your ability to collaborate and form coalitions and persuade in the years ahead. The ultimate bad example of this is the manager who burns everyone out and creates a retention nightmare.*

*And it's not just your colleagues at your level. Those are most important - they have to like working with you. If I don't feel that from them, it will be very hard for me to support you having role power over them, or folks like them at any level.*

*You also have to have (and maybe that means creating them from scratch) good relationships with my peers. They have to know you, and trust you. Even folks at my boss's level have to feel good about your people skills. You don't want to get close to being ready, have them find out they don't know you at all, and have to suddenly start interacting with them like a political campaign. It happens, but it's very high risk.*

*Team members of projects you're on have to know you, trust you, and yes even like you. They have to be able to say if someone asks them, "oh yeah, she's quite good. Smart, nice, hard-working, good team player." Without these kinds of strong relationships, those who make the decisions won't assume that you can communicate and persuade and inspire teams or work well across the org. Working well across the org becomes more important the higher you go, which makes sense when you think about it.*

*The relationships above your level are crucial for another reason. You may think I have absolute control of your promotion; I do NOT. I have to compete for limited budget, limited positions at various levels, and other constraints the organization puts on promotions. That means I have to compete with my peers who want to promote THEIR folks for similar reasons. You want to get promoted, make it OBVIOUS you deserve it. Take the tough projects, take the projects that require you to build relationships across the organization (and therefore visibility to your strengths across the organization). I am not the sole decision-maker here; help me NOW for when I decide you're ready.*

*At this point, you've got to be thinking 'how am I going to do this?? How does someone create and grow relationships? What if I'm not naturally a people person?' It's actually pretty easy: **Communicate more, about what others care about, in ways that make sense to them.***

*This means paying attention to others and how they communicate. Do they really prefer email? Or is that just easiest for you? What do they care about? What do they care about that's NOT in alignment with what you care about? When was the last time you did them a favor? What's their spouse's name? Kids? You want favors, you better start doing them. Getting promoted is not all about you. Your promotion that happens to you will be in part based on what happens to others because of you.*

*Don't make the mistake of thinking that all of this stuff is 'just politics'. It's not. What everyone calls politics are just the normal and reasonable **relationship effects** that happen in human organizations. What I'm talking about is not 'playing politics.' It's creating relationships.*

*If you want to be in a place where there are no politics, start your own firm, or die. Once we accept they exist, and we don't belittle these relationship effects with cynicism, we can build lasting relationships.*

*One final thought about relationships. A promotion means you'll have responsibility for others, usually managing them. The most powerful thing managers can do to deliver results and retention is to get to know their team. **How can we be sure you can build relationships with a team of directs if you haven't shown us you can already do it?***



## 5. Explain The Process.

The last thing you do in this conversation is talk about how your organization promotes people. It's last because when we cover it first, interested directs think that it's most important, and think it's a system to be gamed. They put too much energy into the tactics for advancement, rather than the substance of success, which can lead to advancement. Advancement is an ancillary outcome, not a result to be achieved. You could say: *achieve success, and let the promotion be an extra reward.*

Of course, every organization is different. You'll have to modify our generic description with the way your org does it. If you don't know how your org does it - a lot of us don't, it's normal - share the generic approach, and start learning more about your firm's approach.

Here's how it might sound.

*Those are the things you can work on. Results and relationships. Substantive work and strong communication.*

*Here's how most organizations approach promotion situations. The first thing you should know is that people are **never** promoted by their boss. At a minimum, it's your boss's boss: for you, my boss. Sometimes it's even higher than that. In really well-run orgs, a senior exec in your division weighs in or at least blesses who's going where.*

*Promotions are part of the organization's succession planning. Succession planning takes up a significant portion of time of the most senior people here. Great CEOs are often quoted as saying they spend as much as 30% of their time on people issues.*

*And to be clear, if what you want is a promotion, and you have done all the things I've described here beautifully, **you won't get promoted if there isn't an open position for you to move into.** I know that's frustrating to hear, but that's the way it is everywhere.*

*Here's an example. You've been killing it. My boss's boss's boss, the division VP, leaves to become CEO at another firm. You might think, 'hey, that means there's going to be a ripple affect, with some promotions above me, and that will leave a slot for me to be considered for.*

*That's true. But it's also true that most of us tend to think of line promotions: the best senior director will take the VP slot, a director will move up to senior director, a senior*

*manager will get the director slot, and a manager will get a senior manager role, leaving a hole at the manager level.*

*Sure, that happens. But what folks forget is that there are non-line managers, in HR, or corporate development, or in a sister division, or even a subsidiary, who may have been being groomed for that VP's slot. And when she gets it, that whole domino effect stops. Or, maybe the dominos happen, but the various directorates within the division are different enough that our group isn't going to be the place where the tail of the dominos fall.*

*What's more, the CEO says, well, you know, I never really liked the way the previous guy had that division structured, and I'm going to re-org the whole thing. And I think they're a little bloated (over here in our division where the VP left), and he says, let's collapse them a little. That might leave LESS manager slots in our division, directorate, and group. Boom: opportunity becomes a situation where there are some packages offered for folks to leave - less opportunities, not more.*

*I don't mean to paint a bleak future. Sometimes the CEO lets his VPs run their own succession plans, except for the top 200 or so managers, who are looked at by the C-Suite regularly. And the dominos come our way.*

*You can see pretty quickly that all of that is out of our control. And succession discussions are generally held pretty close to the vest. The lesson here is that knowing how all of that happens isn't where we're going to win opportunities.*

*At a macro level, about the only trend that is going to improve our chances for more responsibilities is company growth. Growth is the rising tide that lifts boats by creating more managerial opportunities within our existing organization. If our group adds more people to handle increased sales, more managers are going to be needed (though probably not initially).*

*And the best way for us to affect company growth is, you guessed it, exceptional results and relationships. :-)*

*As far as the actual promotion process at our level, when someone vacates a role close to us, usually that person's boss is supposed to have someone ready to step into the role. The most likely choice is the leaving manager's Number Two, if she has one identified. Once*

*that happens, that manager's vacancy is filled with THEIR Number Two.*

*Usually those decisions are blessed by the boss of the boss who lost someone. And, HR gets involved, at probably less of a level than a blessing - maybe at the level of having a right to object if there are significant concerns.*

*If there's not a Number Two, the opening may take a few days to be filled. In that case, the manager of the opening consults with HR and her boss. In all such cases, the person chosen either meets with HR to discuss compensation, or with their boss after the boss has consulted with HR.*

*We generally can't assume that the person getting promoted takes over the leaving person's pay package. There are some standard changes that include some additional benefits at higher levels. But actual salary compensation isn't simple. A vacating manager with 20 years experience will likely have been paid more than his replacement. As you probably know, because of something called salary bands, it's possible that a direct who is paid at the top of her range is already being paid above the lowest level of the manager role they're being promoted into.*

*That doesn't mean that you would suffer a reduction in pay with a promotion. You'll get an increase, in most situations. If you get promoted during a weak market, you may be expected to keep your existing pay even as you get a promotion.*

*In some cases, an open managerial role is opened to applications pursuant to an interview process. Internal interviews are just like external ones in terms of your need to prepare. Now you can see where the point I made earlier about your resume really matters.*

*If you go to a completely different division for an interview - and I'll encourage you to do so, and provide some guidance as best I can - you'll be relying on the strength of three things: your performance, your relationships, and your interview preparation and performance. And it's fairly normal for there to be someone in the mix, usually from that group, for whom the promotion will be theirs to lose. The interview process validates whatever choice the decision maker will make.*

*As you can see, there's a lot to consider. The process is good to know about, but again it isn't where our leverage is. When the time comes and you're ready, we'll know more and*

*work hard on those parts we can influence.*

*For now, though, it's about results and relationships. I'm glad you've asked and I'm happy to be able to share this. It will save us a lot of false starts.*

*What questions do you have?*

## **Wrap Up**

- 1. It's a Fair And Even A GOOD Question**
- 2. "I'm glad you asked"**
- 3. It Starts With Significant Results**
- 4. Build Great Relationships**
- 5. Explain The Process**

When directs ask how they can get promoted, let's not roll our eyes. It's a good and fair question, and the answer includes the career watchwords of results and relationships, and a process overview.

Having several directs who want to get promoted is NOT a problem. It's an opportunity to motivate them to higher performance, and to help shape your organization with ethical leaders.