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Six Ways To Demonstrate You're Promotion-Ready

Sally Blount, CONTRIBUTOR

Dean of Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University



Bigger titles bring bigger responsibilities. Whether it's taking on your first management job or joining your first board, every time your title or responsibilities expand, it requires mastering a new level of interpersonal awareness and finesse. Figuring out how to navigate all the different offices and conference rooms you enter as you move up requires a lot of vigilance — watching how different people behave and noticing how people react to them.

Here are my six “go-to” tips for demonstrating you're promotion-ready. (Consider them a mini field guide for reaching higher altitudes.)

1. Use upward interactions to show that you can think big picture. Think forest, not trees. You think you've got headaches at work? Your boss and

boss's boss outpace you by multiples, they have all of your headaches plus those of everybody else who reports to them. So when you get their undivided attention (whether in person, by phone or e-mail), you want to use the exposure to show that you see things from their perspective — you think strategically and can help solve *their* solutions.

To show you can think big picture, pick agenda items that:

- Outline new strategic initiatives, product ideas or plans to tackle a particularly vexing process challenge.
- Set expectations and gain feedback on upcoming events that have strategic import; e.g., high-stakes sales meetings, investor calls, key supplier or customer visits, etc.
- Or, highlight off-plan performance — both good and bad. When good, you give your boss something to celebrate. When bad, be upfront, know why, and have solutions for improvement.

2. Match the media to the message. When communicating with your boss, you want to align the media with your message. This may seem simple, but I can tell you that even the best crafted argument can go astray if you've chosen the wrong means for delivering it.

E-mail works well for good news and simple messages, where closure is easy.

- Phone works best when simple, but nuanced direct interchange is needed and time is of the essence.
- Face-to-face is essential for deep thinking, enlightened problem solving, and non-routine interpersonal topics.

3. Set expectations up front. Whether an e-mail, phone call or meeting, be clear at the beginning about what you are hoping to accomplish; that is, what information needs to be conveyed, decisions made, or new issues teed up. Don't leave your boss guessing, or having to read through two paragraphs on an iPhone screen, to figure out your point.

4. Translate oral understandings into written follow-up. After a meeting, track every task you've agreed to undertake and connect each to a timeframe and deliverable. Your goal is to summarize and circle back quickly, within 24 hours whenever possible, and strive to make the summary as concise as possible. You want to assure that your understanding of next steps matches theirs, while it is still fresh.

5. Close earlier loops before opening too many new ones. You want to be known as someone who thinks strategically *and* delivers operationally. You

don't want to be "the guy/gal" with great ideas, but no follow-through, and you don't want your boss wondering "whatever happened about X . . .?" One way to avoid this is to use the beginning of each face-to-face interaction, or monthly update, to review any outstanding items and briefly share what you've learned or resolved from last time.

6. Bring your best thinking to the table every time. If you're asked to research an idea, or you decide to bring a new idea to the table, don't wing it. Gather as much information and data as you can and pre-digest it. That is, organize it, cull it down, and crystallize the essentials *before* the meeting at which you plan to raise it.

As a visually-oriented person, I often choose to capture new ideas in writing. One-page Powerpoint diagrams or short bulleted Word documents are my "go-to" formats for distilling thoughts and sharing them with others. Whenever possible, I pressure test ideas out loud with a wise colleague. On most topics, my goal is to be so well-prepared that my boss and I don't need to discuss any topic more than once or twice before we reach a go-no go decision.

Bottom line

There is no foolproof way to impress the folks who are higher-up every time. But the roots of excellence lie in planning and using your upward interactions well. With careful thought and clear communications, you can become top-of-mind when the next advancement opportunity arises.