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Tips and Tricks for Negotiating (and Handling) Promotions

Skills and Professional Development

Alfred Hitchcock purportedly said, “When an actor comes to me and wants to discuss his character, I say, ‘It’s in the script.’ If he says, ‘But what’s my motivation?’ I say, ‘Your salary.’”

That may seem overly harsh, but the reality of life is that salary is often a big motivator for our work. Yet asking for raises and promotions sometimes feels taboo or awkward. I get that. These conversations have never come naturally to many of us, but they should.

This article will provide you with some tips and tricks you can use to make that conversation a bit easier and maximize your chances of a favorable outcome. I’ll also explain some ways you can navigate the change from peer to supervisor if you get that coveted promotion.

Do you want the promotion?

First, identify what you actually want. Are you purely interested in a higher salary? If so, maybe you just want a raise.

Do you want to be titled higher? Do you want more responsibility? Do you want direct reports? Do you want a combination of the foregoing? Do you want to mentor or be a leader in some other way? Perhaps you can do the latter without the promotion.

Consider whether the role you’re targeting would be a good fit for you. For example, do you want to devote the additional time and effort the new position would require? Do you like the work that the job entails?

Laying the foundation

If you determine that you do want a promotion, build a strong case that you have earned the promotion. Most often, managers consider promotions on an annual basis, so accomplish tangible goals for about a year leading up to your ask for a promotion.

In that year, take initiative. Tackle projects that add value to the legal department and your company. Make processes within your organization better. Jump in to help when needed, even if it's not your area of expertise. Learn new concepts. Prove you can handle a promotion and show management that you can continue to excel in a new role with a higher title.

Keep track of what you've done in an organized, easily accessible, and easily presentable way. Some companies use third-party vendor software (like Lattice, Betterworks, or SAP SuccessFactors) to track goals, which can make this easier. If your company does not do that, keep your own list.

Making the ask

Now that you've done everything you can to justify that promotion, it's time to ask for it. Many of us assume that, if we do a good enough job in our roles, our bosses will reward us for that hard work without us having to ask. That's a lovely thought, but it's often not how the workplace works.

This can apply to raises as well. Your boss has a budget and, if you think of that budget as a pie, a portion of that pie is allocated to salaries/raises/promotions. It may be easiest for your boss to allocate budget to the noisier, more demanding employees. "The squeaky wheel gets the grease" is a well-known saying for a reason. Ask for what you deserve.

Be prepared

Prior to your ask, have your organized, easily accessible, and presentable goals you've accomplished ready to share with your boss. Additionally, if necessary, arm yourself with statistics, facts, and/or figures.

For example, Robert Half shares a salary guide every year that gives a sense of what your salary should be, taking into account your years of experience, title, and other important factors. Additionally, have an idea of what title, responsibility, and direct reports someone with your education and experience would generally have.

Be confident

When the time to speak to your boss arrives, do what you need to do to reach maximum confidence. If you've done the preparation, know that you're ready for this conversation.

If necessary, use techniques like self-talk and music or whatever sets your soul on fire to put yourself in the right mindset. If you negotiate in your role, it may help to treat your conversation with your manager like the negotiations you would engage in with vendors or customers.

Be clear

When speaking with your boss, be clear in your ask. Don't use a lot of filler language or qualifiers. Be direct and concise.

For example, you can explain that you appreciate the opportunities you've been given to add value and that you took those opportunities and made a difference in your organization by accomplishing X, Y, and Z. Those examples should be tangible.

Then, make your ask. You want a promotion, so state that. Try to avoid saying something like, "I thought maybe I could possibly be considered to move up if it's okay." Be as explicit as possible in your ask.

As part of these discussions, you'll likely want to negotiate salary. For that conversation or separate conversations about raises, data like salary guides can be helpful. Go into your conversation with your boss with a target salary or salary range in mind like you would in a job interview.

Transitioning into your new role… or not

Try not to take your conversation, or the decision made after your conversation, personally. If you do not get a promotion you feel you deserve, you have options. You can wait to see if it comes later, or you can leave for a company that gives you what you're looking for. But taking any of it personally is likely to be negative and unproductive for you.

If you get the promotion you've asked for, it may mean you'll now manage those who were once your peers. If you've already cultivated fruitful relationships with your colleagues and, thus, have the respect of your peers, you can parlay that into respect as a supervisor.

Professionals in Human Resources and labor and employment attorneys have made the following point to me numerous times: From a legal risk perspective, perception of fairness is the most vitally important aspect of managing people.

This is also true for morale and employee retention. As a manager, of course, you want to behave legally and ethically, but it's also important to keep in mind that your direct reports need to feel like they're being treated fairly.

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One way to do this is to give them a voice. Just as you may have collaborated with them when you were peers, ask for their input on matters you're handling. It makes your team feel valued. You can also try to give them work that is meaningful for them. If you started as their peer, you might have some inside information on who likes to do what type of work.

Additionally, pitch in when necessary. Be willing to do the work your staff does if they're overwhelmed and you have bandwidth. The best leaders I work with are willing to get right in the trenches with their teams. It's also a great way to know first-hand what is going right and what is going wrong in the work and processes.

In conclusion, good luck if you decide you want a promotion. Ask for what you deserve with confidence and, if you find yourself managing others, treat those around you and those who work for you well.

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In her role as senior legal counsel with Vendavo, Inc., Colombo works cross-functionally with the relevant business teams and stakeholders, providing legal advice on a broad range of topics and guiding the business on legal compliance with a particular focus on drafting, managing, and negotiating client and vendor contracts of moderate-to-high complexity from the bid phase through contract execution, including software licensing and SaaS-specific provisions, as well as matters related to contractual liability and risk-shifting provisions, data privacy, intellectual property, and products.