CHAPTER **14**

INVISIBLE COMPANY BARRIERS STOPPING YOUR CAREER GROWTH

Invisible barriers exist all over the corporate ladder. In this chapter we will expose some of these invisible barriers, so you know what you are up against. Are these barriers insurmountable? Absolutely not. However, it is going to take hard work, a keen sense to detect when you are up against one, and the knowledge on how to break through these barriers to be successful.

ADVANCED DEGREE BARRIER

One barrier that stretches across all corporate ladders is the advanced degree barrier. The typical pyramid structure of the company with the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) at the top is shown in Figure 14-1. I have taken a general survey of the types of degrees that people have at various positions in the company in several companies. Below the first-line supervisor, about 80% of the people have bachelor degrees, about 15% have Master's degrees, and about 5% have PhD degrees. In between the first-line supervisor and the director level, about 50% of the people have PhD degrees, 40% have Master's degrees, and 10% have Bachelor degrees. Between the director level and the CEO, about 60% have PhD degrees and 40% have Master's degrees. Often at this level a director or VP will have multiple degrees: a doctorate in engineering along with a Master's degree in business. In my survey, I found there was no one at these upper levels with only a Bachelor degree.

So the message comes out loud and clear. If you want to become an upper level manager someday, you will need an advanced degree.
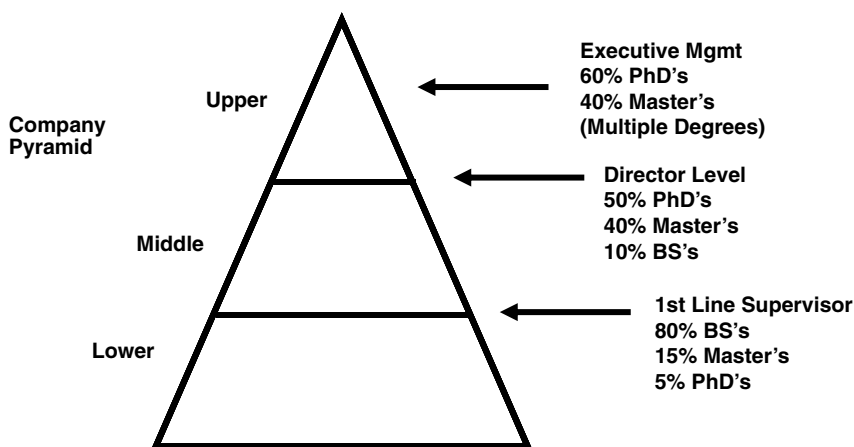
FIGURE 14-1   Hidden educational barriers in a company.

▶ *Career Tip.* An advanced degree and sometimes even multiple degrees are required to climb high up the corporate ladder.

The only way you are going to find this out is by asking people about the degrees they have obtained. This should reveal two interesting things. First, how prevalent advanced degrees are in your organization. Second, the type of advanced degrees that virtually ensure getting ahead. This leads to another invisible barrier, which I refer to as the technical background barrier.

TECHNICAL BACKGROUND BARRIER

One common practice in corporations is only to promote engineers to the upper levels if only they have the right technical background. This is because corporations have built their business based on being the technology leader in specific areas. Therefore, the people with the right technical background are readily promoted while others with technical backgrounds perceived as not appropriate are passed over. Let's look at this example as illustrated on the left-hand side of Figure 14-2. If you are an electrical engineer working for a heavily oriented mechanical company and all the managers above you are mechanical engineers, that tells you something about the promotion policies being followed. Similarly, if you are a software programmer in a chemical company and all the managers have advanced degrees in chemical engineering, it tells you something about how far you can go.

Investigate and try to determine what types of degrees people have above you. If you have the opportunity to interface with a vice president, simply ask about their background. They are usually most willing to share their experiences and most significant career accomplishments. This opens your
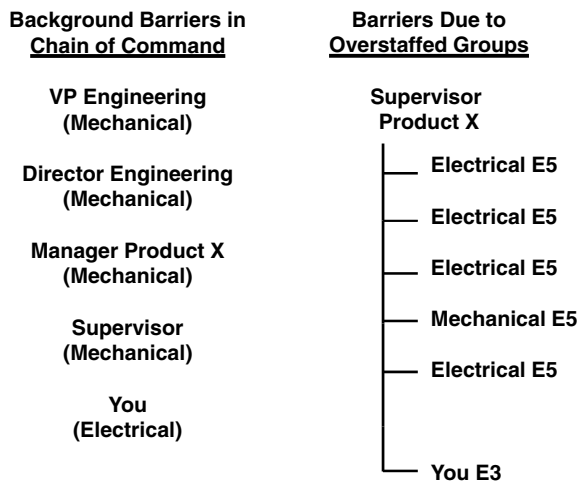
Background Barriers in
Chain of Command

Barriers Due to
Overstaffed Groups

VP Engineering
(Mechanical)

Supervisor
Product X

Director Engineering
(Mechanical)

    — **Electrical E5**

    — **Electrical E5**

Manager Product X
(Mechanical)

    — **Electrical E5**

Supervisor
(Mechanical)

    — **Mechanical E5**

    — **Electrical E5**

You
(Electrical)

    — **You E3**

FIGURE 14-2   Technical background barriers and overstaffing barriers.

door to opportunity. Ask what they would recommend for a younger employee. Hopefully, at that point, you are hearing the shortcuts that you need to know and their hidden criteria for promoting.

OVERSTAFFING BARRIERS

In the organization on the right-hand side in Figure 14-2, you are assigned to a group that has all level 5s in the group. You are at level 3. Do you think you stand a good chance of promotion in this group when the group is overstaffed with level 5s already? I seriously doubt it; in fact, my experience has shown you are the only one doing real work. So if they promote you, the group has to find someone else to accomplish the assignments. This condition is called overstaffing and seriously eliminates any chance for advancement of junior engineers. Have you determined the grade levels of people in your group? If you are in an overstaffed group or top-heavy group as it is sometimes referred to, your lack of career growth may have nothing to do with performance and everything to do with being top-heavy. Your supervisor cannot afford to promote you since they already have too many senior-level people. This condition occurs quite often and I have experienced it myself. In fact, when I was appointed a supervisor for the first time, the group I was put in charge of had three level E5 engineers. This was against company policy; each engineering group should only have one. So, my first job was to find jobs for two of the E5s in other parts of the company.

▶ *Career Tip.* Knowing the engineering levels for all the people in your group will quickly identify if you are up against an overstaffing barrier.

Correspondingly if your group lacks any senior-level people, this is your opportunity to move up quickly and fill the senior-level position. It is important to know the level for each person in your group and determine if you are in an overstaffed or understaffed situation. Then take the appropriate career action.

▶ *Career Tip.* Working in a group that has few or no senior-level people is being in the right spot at the right time.

DEPARTMENT CHARTER BARRIER

Another hidden career barrier that is often not discussed is the department charter barrier. This career barrier is the fact that according to the department's charter, all work in the department can be performed, for example, by level E3 engineers or lower. Another way to think of it is the most challenging assignment in the department only requires a level E3 and does require an upper level of engineer (E4–E5). Therefore, if you are a level E3 looking to get promoted to E4, it will not occur since the department cannot justify using these upper level workers to get work done. The department is incapable of promoting an engineer from level E3 to level E4 since, by definition, they do not have work in the department for an E4.

If you are a level E3 and hoping to get promoted to E4 in a department like this, you do not stand a chance in this department. The department does not have the charter to do level E4 work and therefore, by definition, there will be no E4 engineers working in the department. Have you checked your department to determine if they have a department charter like this one? Much to my surprise, I found myself in a department that had a charter like this and quickly realized that I had to change departments to get my next promotion.

▶ *Career Tip.* Hidden career barriers exist in most engineering groups. To overcome these barriers, you have to do research to find out if you are up against one of them.

SUMMARY

Do you think managers have a bias on the type of people they promote? Absolutely. Have you ever asked managers above you what their backgrounds are? This knowledge can be very beneficial in determining the type of career barrier you are up against.

Are there other barriers in the corporate ladder? Yes. Another common invisible career barrier or promotion selection criteria is the engineering school or area of the United States that you attended school. If all the managers are from one engineering school or one region and you are not from this

school or region, then you have an invisible career barrier you must overcome.

If you are a woman, check to see how many women are at each level of the ladder in the organization. If you find the percentage does not stay the same and it drastically drops off as women move up the ladder, you have gender barriers.

All the barriers discussed in this chapter can be overcome with hard work and knowledge of what the next best career move is. The challenge is to quickly discover when you are up against one of these invisible career barriers and take the appropriate actions to overcome them.

Have you identified any career actions you want to take as a result of reading this chapter? If so, please make sure to capture these ideas before you forget by recording them in the notes section at the back of the book.

ASSIGNMENTS AND DISCUSSION TOPICS

1 Inquire and find out the backgrounds of the managers in your chain of command. What advanced degrees do they possess and what are their technical backgrounds as well as the engineering schools they graduated from. How do your degrees and engineering background compare to theirs?
2 Find out the engineering levels of everyone in your peer group. Are you in an overstaffed or understaffed situation?