

PART **9**

**FAST TRACK
ADVANCEMENT
AND CAREER
ACCELERATORS**

CHAPTER 49

GETTING ON THE FAST TRACK FOR ADVANCEMENT

If you want to move ahead quickly, you have to become a member of the fast-track crowd. The fast-track crowd is acutely aware that working long hours is simply not enough [1–3]. It is just the minimum requirement for keeping a job and not the means to fast-track advancement. The avenues to fast-track advancement lie in another direction; a direction that requires skills in selecting your supervisor, your assignments, and progress reporting. Let's identify some fast-track actions.

SELECT YOUR SUPERVISOR

The quickest way to advance is to attach yourself to a quickly rising supervisor and ride along. What you want to happen is every time your supervisor is promoted, you are also promoted. For this to happen you must select and work for a supervisor who is clearly on the way up.

Fast-track supervisors do not wear name tags identifying themselves nor do they come along that often. You have to be able to recognize them and seek them out. You can identify fast-track supervisors by their great visibility with upper management. You can also identify them by the fact that their groups usually receive most of the special assignments from the vice presidents. Another characteristic trait is that their groups usually receive more awards and recognition than most groups.

Once you have identified a fast-track supervisor, you need to transfer to his or her group. Once in the group you stand a better than average chance for fast-track advancement. Fast-track supervisors generally tend to rate their group members very high. This gives upper management the impression that the group has superior performance that is a result of the fast-track supervisor's outstanding efforts. The fast-track supervisor realizes the value of overrating his or her people rather than underrating them.

Another characteristic of fast-track supervisors is their tendency to know how to get upper-management visibility for their employees. A fast-track supervisor will always have employees nominated for awards. Therefore, you stand a much better chance of getting an award for your accomplishments when you work for a fast-track supervisor.

Once you are working for a fast-track supervisor you need to make yourself his or her right arm. You need to be alert and always ready to put in the extra effort and special demands. You must give it your all and be loyal and work as much as possible. Your primary objective is to make your supervisor look good, so they will be promoted [4,5].

Of course, simply executing all their commands will not automatically result in promotions. You must demonstrate that you have the skills and knowledge to perform your job successfully. Your ability to get the job done and exhibit excellent work are basic requirements for successful career advancement.

Let's look at the negative aspects of settling for just any supervisor. Suppose you settle for a supervisor who has been in the same position for the last 10 years and has shown no growth. This supervisor's career may have peaked and he or she has probably been passed over for promotion. They are as high in the company as they can go. Working for this supervisor could actually represent a roadblock to your career. If he is not moving up, you will more than likely also not be moving up either.

Another case in point is settling for an average performing supervisor who does not make waves. Supervisors who receive only average ratings tend to give only average ratings. Supervisors who want to only do their job and go home tend to stay away from upper management. If he is not getting upper-management visibility, then most likely you won't either. These are only some of the examples as to why it is so important for you to select your supervisor and not settle for just anyone. A fast tracker quickly realizes the value in selecting his supervisor. If at all possible you want to choose your supervisor.

DEVELOP EXCELLENT COMMUNICATION AND PRESENTATION SKILLS

If you communicate in an average manner and your presentations are just average you can only expect to advance at an average rate. To get on the fast track you must have excellent communication skills and excellent presentation skills. The excellent communication skills are manifested in the written and oral reports you give to your supervisor and upper management.

Your written reports must clearly reflect your superior performance. All reports need to be well-organized and neat in appearance. The results should be reported in a manner that allows the reader to clearly graph the significant conclusions. Graphical and mathematical analyses are a must. If possible, the

reports should at least be done using Microsoft Word or PowerPoint charts that include graphics and color.

Generating excellent written reports is not a natural talent. It is something that is acquired through practice and training. To learn impressive ways of writing you can take writing courses. I highly recommend that you attend two types of writing courses. The first is a technical writing course and the second is an advertisement writing course. The technical writing course will show you how to organize technical material. The advertisement writing course will show you how to accentuate the positive and give it the additional flair to make your communication stand out from the rest.

A technical report can be extremely dry and hard to read. Even if your report represents a great scientific breakthrough, it still may get ignored due to poor writing. You need to jazz up your reports with a little advertising flair if you do not want your hard efforts ignored. The advertising course will show you how to do this. Learning how to write good technical reports with a bit of advertising flair is a must for the fast tracker.

Having great oral communication skills is even more important. You absolutely must know how to give a good oral report. Most upper-level managers do not have the time to read long reports. They want a summary of the significant points and they want it now. Oral reporting is also not a natural skill. You must develop this skill through training and practice. To develop this skill take a speech class or join Toastmasters. Toastmasters is an organization that meets on a periodic basis and its members practice giving speeches and oral reports. The organization provides step-by-step training and guidance on how to improve your presentations. Joining Toastmasters is an excellent way to develop your oral reporting talents and even meet upper-level managers who often attend the group's meetings.

Practice is absolutely necessary to perfect your oral reports. One way to practice is by giving oral reports at home and use a video recorder to tape yourself; play back to critique yourself. You will be surprised at all the mistakes you make. By videotaping yourself you can quickly see what you have to work on. It's always better to make the mistakes at home than in front of your supervisor, coworkers, or at meetings.

Some people ask me if this is really necessary and do they need to practice? To this question I always respond with a large and emphatic yes! Athletes practice for hours; actors and actresses will rehearse their lines for hours; lawyers will practice their courtroom presentation; salesmen always practice their pitches; politicians practice their speeches; clergy will practice their sermons. Why? To give the best performance they can. They want you to see them at their best. This is something natural that nearly all professions do. Practicing is something that most other professions consider imperative. It would appear to be good commonsense to practice any presentations you plan on giving. Why is it that engineers think they do not need to practice presentations?

Finally, you must be able to make great presentations. You must acquire the skills to speak in front of a group at meetings. For this you need to learn how to create presentation material, how to operate projectors, laptops, what makes a good chart, how to handle questions, and how to speak with authority. Great presentations are an absolute must for fast-track development. Remember, your supervisor will want the person with the best speaking and presentation skills to give the report to the vice president. Continue on if you're still interested in becoming a fast tracker.

GO FOR THE SPECIAL PROJECTS

Choose projects that will give you the most visibility. Projects that lock you in a lab with little or no visibility require special effort by the fast tracker to get that visibility. These projects may be technically challenging but they can keep you away from the eyes of management. The fast tracker realizes that selecting your project is very important. If you have a choice of assignments, choose the supervisor's pet project. This is another fast-track move.

THE RIGHT TIMING FOR GETTING ON AND OFF PROJECTS

The fast tracker is said to be acutely aware that there are good times to get on a project and there are good times to get off a project. At the beginning of the project there is usually a lot of visibility by management to ensure the project gets started on the right foot. Upper management is normally involved and monitoring initial progress on the project. Getting on a project at the beginning provides the engineer with extra visibility. The beginning of a project is when most of the promotions are usually handed out.

As the projects progress unforeseen problems may arise. These problems may result in schedule delays and large cost overruns. Most major problems will surface after about a year into the project. If you can see that the project is headed for disaster, the fast-track response will be to get off before the problems are discovered. This is an excellent time to leave a project. The fast tracker can honestly say the problems occurred after she or he left. This allows the fast tracker to be dissociated with any problem projects and always presents a successful image.

When a project hits major problems, management often assembles teams to fix the problems. They sometimes refer to these as "Tiger Teams" or "Get Well Teams." The fast tracker will join a project that has severe problems only as a member of these Tiger or Get Well teams. Team members are usually assigned by upper management to solve the difficult problems. The fast tracker realizes the special teams have extra visibility with upper management due to the pressure to get the project back on track. Often the special teams must report daily progress to upper management. A fast-track engineer who has excellent reporting and presentation skills is now in a great position

to move ahead quickly. This is the only good way and good time to get on a problem project.

As the problems are solved and the project comes to an end, the visibility of the project dramatically decreases with little opportunity for career advancement. However, engineers often continue to stay on the project with little or no benefit to their career. The engineer may stay too long because of the large amount of clean-up work needed to close out the project. Or the engineer may stay on the project longer than she or he should because the work was very interesting. Not wanting to leave the project is only natural, since you have spent so much time and effort getting the results. These are some of the reasons why the engineers stay on a project longer than is good for their career. The fast tracker is aware when a project has entered the final stage and has little or no benefit for his career. Fast trackers quickly move on to the next career advancing project.

DRESS AND ACT THE PART

Study the dressing habits and mannerisms of your management. Determine the dress code and dress accordingly. Watch for mannerisms displayed by your supervisor. The fact of the matter is that supervisors tend to promote people who look like them and act like them. If it worked for them, then why not copy the successful formula?

SEEK OUT OPPORTUNITIES TO EXCEL

Opportunities to excel present themselves every day. Most people refer to these opportunities as big, unsolvable problems. Consequently, they avoid them as much as they can. By avoiding them they lose the opportunity to shine. The fast tracker looks for these opportunities to excel and selectively chooses to work on them. Naturally, choosing the opportunities to excel that your supervisor considers the most important is key to rapid advancement. The fast tracker knows that the more desperate the supervisor is about the problem, the better the opportunity.

What if the opportunities to excel are on unsolvable problems? Don't worry, this is even better. The supervisor does not expect the employee to solve every problem but just his willingness to try is what will separate him or her from the rest.

MAKE YOUR OWN LUCK

The fast tracker realizes that most projects are not going to be highly successful and result in a promotion. As a matter of fact, the fast tracker realizes just the opposite—that most projects will experience severe problems

and setbacks. She accepts this and plans for it. A fast tracker will always have backup or contingency plans. If you have backup plans that you can fall back on and keep the project moving ahead, it lends great strength to the appearance of a successful project.

► **Career Tip.** Making good backup plans is like planning for luck.

Stick to your plans and put in the effort to see things through to the end. Don't give up at the first sign of trouble. There is an old saying by Thomas Edison that best captures the definition of success. "Success is 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration." As a matter of fact, you can actually look at trouble as a good sign. If there are troubles, they will need you all the more. This is also called job security. With trouble comes extra visibility. With extra visibility and great performance comes promotion. Therefore, trouble means job security and can even be the start of your next promotion. This should help you see the positive side of trouble and, hopefully, help you fear it less when it rears its ugly head.

These are only some of the tips that are available to you on fast tracking for engineers. Other sources of fast-track tips can be found in the trade journals, business magazines, and even professional society meeting proceedings [4]. You have to be alert and search for them. The best thing you can do is collect as many articles on the subject as you can. Place them in a binder and at least twice a year review the articles.

HOW TO GET A GIGA-IMPROVEMENT IN YOUR CAREER

People often ask what they can do to quickly accelerate their careers. What actions should they be constantly striving for that will most benefit their careers? To answer this question I have identified the value of various actions you can take to significantly increase your chances for career advancement. The following is a simplified priority action list for career advancement. By following this prioritized list of actions whenever you can, you should, hopefully, realize a Giga improvement in your career.

Priority List for Career Advancement

- One picture is worth 1,000 words
- One model is worth 1,000 pictures
- One successful project demonstration is worth 1,000 models

- One email is worth 1,000 handwritten notes
- One phone call is worth 1,000 emails
- One face-to-face meeting is worth 1,000 phone calls

- One phone invitation is worth 1,000 email meeting invitations
- One face-to-face invitation is worth 1,000 phone invitations
- Complimentary food at a meeting is worth 1,000 face-to-face invitations

Bottom Line. You realize a Giga-improvement in career advancement by having a face-to-face meeting with upper management while providing food, when demonstrating your successful project.

PRIORITIZE AND FOCUS YOUR CAREER ACTIONS

Being a Certified Master Black Belt in Six Sigma has taught me to prioritize actions and focus energy on only those actions that produce results. You get your best results on “value-added” tasks whereas spending time on “non-value-added” tasks does not produce results. It is easy to apply these principles to your career with the net result of fast tracking your career. If you stop and think for a minute, there are career actions that are truly value-added actions and these should always be top priority and where you focus your actions. These actions directly result in career advancement and absolutely must be done in order for you to accomplish your objectives. Usually, there are only a couple of tasks that qualify for true value-added. Let’s look at some truly value-added career actions.

Value-Added Career Actions (Primary Effect)

- Interview for a new job and accept the offer
- Ask for a promotion
- Ask for better assignments
- Make your company and their products extremely successful

Basically, these are the only real tasks that directly result in career advancement. Fast trackers understand this and focus the majority of their energy on these tasks.

Then there are non-value-added career actions that are nice to do but do not directly result in career advancement. Non-value-added tasks usually make you feel good about what you are doing, or sometimes they are necessary to accomplish your goal but do not produce results by themselves. In Six Sigma terminology, they are cost incurring actions necessary to get the product out the door. For instance, packing and shipping the product is an example of a non-value-added task.

Non-Value-Added or Necessary Career Actions (Secondary Effect)

- Having a career discussion with your boss
- Writing resumes, cover letters, and putting a portfolio together

- Conducting a job search, reading job ads
- Networking for jobs
- Returning for more education

Can you see the difference between non-value and value-added career actions? Fast trackers realize they need to focus most of their energy and time doing only value-added tasks. They realize that the non-value-added tasks are necessary, so they minimize their effort and time on these tasks.

Finally there are wasteful or counterproductive career tasks that should be avoided at all costs. These include:

- Complaining to your coworkers about your job
- Arguing with people
- Settling for the same old ways and never improving
- Reading career articles and never taking an action
- Blaming everyone else for your lack of advancement

If you want to become a fast tracker you need to seriously consider where you put your efforts. Are they value-added career actions or non-value-added actions?

SUMMARY

If you want to move ahead quickly, you have to become a member of the fast-track crowd. The fast-track crowd is acutely aware that working long hours is simply not enough. It is just the minimum requirement for keeping a job and not the means to fast-track advancement. Select and work for a manager who is a mover and shaker and who is quickly rising, and then help them get promoted.

To get on the fast track you must have excellent communication skills and excellent presentation skills. The excellent communication skills are manifested in the written and oral reports you give to your supervisor and upper management. Go for the special projects and look at problems as opportunities for career advancement. Consider the project you are on and the impact on your career. When is the best time to come on the project and when is the best time to leave? Dress the part and act like a leader. Finally, prioritize your career actions and focus your energies on those that produce result and are truly valued-added.

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.

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