

CHAPTER 5

STRATEGIES FOR GETTING YOUR NEXT PROMOTION

There are multiple viable strategies employed by engineers to obtain a promotion and in this chapter we discuss the most commonly used ones. The first and most obvious one is getting a promotion in your present department.

GETTING A PROMOTION IN YOUR PRESENT DEPARTMENT

The first place to look for a promotion is in your present department and with your present supervisor. The best way to do this is to have an open and direct communication with your supervisor about the subject. In other words, have a career discussion. Pick a time and place that is comfortable for both of you. Start out by establishing that you want to discuss your career options within the department. Ask open-ended questions and listen to your supervisor's answers. Here are some good questions to ask:

- How do you see my career coming along?
- What would you recommend I do to get a promotion in the future?
- How close am I to fulfilling all the criteria for promotion?
- Am I demonstrating that I have the capabilities to be promoted to the next level?
- Do you have any specific criteria or capabilities you are looking for in order to be considered for a promotion?
- Are there any barriers or personal improvement areas that I should be aware of?
- What can I improve upon to demonstrate that I am ready for a promotion?
- How long do you think before someone of capabilities could be promoted?

These questions are structured, so they are not threatening in hopes that your supervisor will open up and have some direct communication with you on your chances of being promoted. If the answers come back that you are very near to getting promoted and they are seriously considering it, you are in good shape. You need to keep up the excellent performance and make sure your work continues to support the justification for your promotion.

If the answers come back that you are a long way from being considered for promotion then you need to identify what you are lacking and what you need to improve upon to be considered. The best thing to do is identify some specific area you can improve upon and discuss with your supervisor an action plan leading to your next promotion. If you feel that getting a promotion in your present department is not likely, then you come to the next strategy.

CHANGING DEPARTMENTS FOR A PROMOTION STRATEGY

Going to another department for a promotion is a viable immediate near-term career move you can make and probably the most common one used. New openings in other departments are constantly occurring due to new work coming in, rotational assignments where employees leave the department and even retire. If you use your networking skills, you can find out when these openings are going to occur in advance of them being announced. Fellow employees will tell you so and so just quit, or someone moved, or share their department plan to hire several new people. Knowing in advance when these openings will occur gives you a better opportunity to be ready and sell yourself when the official interviewing starts. Another good indication that openings are becoming available is the retirement party notices and “leaving the company luncheon” signs that are posted in the workplace.

Changing your department may be a good career move even when your present supervisor is happy with your work *and* you are growing and performing but they have given no indication of promoting you. Then what? Your career advancement has come to a grinding halt in the department. In Chapters 8 and 14, I discuss career tools you can utilize against this situation and how to find out the reasons for your lack of advancement.

Another good time to consider this option is when you are not selected for the promotion that exists within your department and someone else in your group is selected. This is a clear indication that your career advancement in this group may be limited and it may be the time to move on or you need to continue to improve your performance before you will be considered.

If you are performing on the job and getting good reviews, and you have not been promoted in the past 5 years, then it is also another good time to consider moving to another department.

Changing departments is not a good career strategy to follow if you make it the only way you get promoted and use it every couple of years to get the

next promotion. Engineering managers look at how long you have been in a department when it comes to the interview for a new position in their department. If you are jumping to a new department too often (multiple department changes in less than two years), you might get labeled as a problem employee who is just getting shuffled around and your chances of being selected are significantly diminished. So this career strategy may help you, but also hurt you if you use it incorrectly.

LEAVING THE COMPANY FOR A PROMOTION STRATEGY

Going to another company to get the promotion is often referred to as jumping ship. This is a good near-term career move if the opportunity at the new company is a significant improvement in your career, or offers a greater long-term advancement potential than simply staying at your company.

Another time to utilize this technique is if, for some reason, your reputation becomes tainted at your present company and it is obvious you are not advancing because of it. Another reason may be that you made a big mistake and because of it, you are going to be passed over for near-term advancements. There is a saying in the industry I have heard many times over the years and at different companies by a multitude of engineers. The saying goes something like this: your great successes are only remembered until the next panic, which is usually only several weeks, but your mistakes are never forgotten and usually take 4–5 years for your career to overcome.

Engineers can use going to another company very effectively to get a promotion. To successfully execute this strategy, the engineer must leave their company on a good note and take a position that is a promotion in another noncompetitive company. I have also witnessed engineers returning to the original company after a couple of years with another promotion. The engineer picks up the two promotions within a short period of time. What was really astounding was that, in several cases, the original supervisor hired back the engineer. It turned out that the original supervisor did not realize what a valuable employee they had until the employee left. Once the employee left, the manager realized the mistake and in one case actually pursued the engineer to return. If you decide to engage in this strategy, make sure you check the company policies about leaving a company and then returning. Some companies allow you to come back within 5 years and retain your seniority and benefits!

► **Career Tip.** Be knowledgeable about your employer before job switching!

This strategy sometimes fails miserably when the engineer leaves the company for a promotion, only to have the new company go out of business

shortly thereafter, leaving the engineer unemployed or having to take a significant pay cut just to have a job. Be knowledgeable about your employer before job switching.

GOING TO THE COMPETITOR FOR A PROMOTION

Going to the competitor is another career strategy that is commonly used and may work successfully and also fail miserably. The idea here is the competitor is willing to hire the engineer since they know all inside information on the company business, who the customers are, and may even bring customers and contacts along. Making this career move is very stressful. Usually within an hour of the employee announcing they are going to a competitor, they along with their belongings are marched out the door by security, never to return. Some engineers believe since they did all the work, they can bring whatever knowledge and technology they wish to the competitor. This violates nearly all company rights. If the engineer brings unauthorized information to the new company and they benefit, there is usually an investigation by the legal department and if anything shows up, lawsuits are filed. The situation can turn ugly rather quickly.

This strategy might also be short-lived as the new employer may just be using the engineer to gain whatever knowledge they can. After the engineer has shared all the information from the old company with their new company and has nothing left to offer, they are suddenly let go for some nebulous reason. The engineer was simply terminated because they did not perform up to expectations during the probation trial period. The engineer finds themselves unemployed and searching for a new job.

On the positive side, competitors may quickly realize the value of the new engineer and move them into higher levels of responsibility. The engineer's career advances and they become a driving force in other companies.

One of my most interesting observations is that this strategy, although highly risky, is utilized by engineers at all levels of the company. I know of engineers from junior levels to the most senior level of vice presidents who have utilized this strategy of going to a competitor to get the next career advancement.

SUMMARY

There are multiple viable strategies employed by engineers to obtain a promotion. The first place to start looking is in your present department. Your supervisor is key to this and having a frank and open discussion on the subject of your promotion is highly recommended. If you determine this is not an option you can look at other departments within your company or consider moving to other companies. Going to a competitor is included in looking outside the company. Whatever your strategy is for getting the next

promotion it is going to require a high-energy state on your part and tact in dealing with people and situations. Promotions do not happen just because you think you are ready; they happen because others think you are ready also. Others will only consider you are ready for a promotion after you clearly demonstrate your ability to handle more and perform at a level above your present one in all aspects of your job.

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 Why should you start with your supervisor when looking for your next promotion?
- 2 Should you share what you are doing with others in your department? Or others in your company?
- 3 Can your mentor help you?
- 4 What is a reasonable time to wait for a promotion?
- 5 Do you know the criteria for the level above yours?