

Achieving & the **LOOK** **SOUND** of **LEADERSHIP**

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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Pursuing a Promotion ▶ 09/04/14

Give yourself a promotion

Arturo had been passed over for promotion because, as his boss told me, “He doesn’t feel like a senior vice president yet.”

During our first few coaching sessions, I found myself agreeing: Arturo did not seem ready to be an SVP at his company. I felt pretty sure he’d win his promotion eventually; I just wasn’t sure how soon that would be.

The feedback I’d collected about him revealed that people liked him and saw him as one of the company’s highest performing vice presidents.

“If I’m so high-performing, why can’t I get this darn promotion?” he asked. “Isn’t that the way it goes? You get better and better, then you graduate upwards?”

“Not at your level,” I said. “At *junior* levels, people graduate. But senior people need to prove they can do the job *before* they’re promoted.”

“That feels like a Catch-22,” he said.

“It is. So you have to give yourself the promotion.”

He clapped his hands and leaned forward. “I’m in! Show me where to sign!”

“I’m serious,” I said, although I was smiling.

“I’m serious, too! How do I give myself a promotion?”

I looked at him, then said, “Think differently about everything you do.” I paused, then went on. “Think like the role you want, not like the one you have. In your case, think like an SVP.”

"Even though I've never been one? Catch-22 again?"

"We're not talking about aliens from space! You've been around enough SVPs to know how they think. But I'm guessing you've been so busy doing your VP job that you haven't had time to try thinking like an SVP."

He looked at the cityscape towering outside the window. "That's true. But now that I've got the VP thing under control, I have some extra capacity. So what do I need to think differently about?"

"Four things," I answered. He grabbed his pen. "Visualize, network, delegate and communicate."

And so began a conversation that lasted many months about how to give yourself a promotion to get the real one.

Visualize

The first part of giving yourself a promotion is simply believing you are allowed to execute at a higher level. You can operate at a higher level whenever you're ready. No one's going to tell you not to. You just have to visualize your work differently.

"What does that mean?" Arturo asked.

"I think everyone gets comfortable at a certain 'altitude,'" I responded. "You operate at the VP altitude without even thinking about it. To visualize your work differently, you have to think beyond your usual boundaries. I call it clicking out."

"Clicking out?"

"Like in Google Maps," I said. "Let's say that at your VP level, you're viewing the world from the altitude where you see streets and boulevards. If you were going to click further in, you'd be down at your direct reports' level. You'd see property lines and patio shapes."

"So clicking out," he said, "is seeing what my boss sees."

"Right. At her altitude, a lot of the streets and boulevards you look at every day are completely invisible. She's seeing whole freeway systems and broad landscapes."

"So I need to be able to see what she sees." He nodded. "I could do that. It's not what I'm used to, but I could do it. At least sometimes."

"Good," I said. "If you're going to get promoted, you need to be able to visualize your work at a higher level."

"I see how that'd be giving myself a promotion."

"That's part of it," I agreed.

Networking

When we discussed networking, Arturo said, "Networking always feels a little creepy to me. Like the only reason I'm talking to the person is because I want something from them."

"That's not how I think about networking," I assured him. I said I'd send him an [Executive Coaching Tip I'd written on the subject](#) years ago. Then I said, "When you're pursuing a promotion, it's important to begin your networking with a lot of homework."

We began to discuss each senior vice president and division president in detail. How loose-handed was this one? How did that one like to receive information? What were the top priorities for each?

At the end of the inventory, Arturo said, "Wow, there's a lot I don't know about some of those folks. I've got a lot of homework to do."

He began to pay attention to how the senior leaders were—or weren't!—like each other. And he thought carefully about how he was, or wasn't, like each of them. He saw he was already acting like an SVP in certain areas but had some gaps that needed developing.

During his observations, Arturo noticed that each executive had a particular line of questioning he or she returned to again and again. "Some are always driven by the numbers. Some are more deadline-driven. Or resource-driven. It's amazing! I never paid much attention to it before. I just did my work the same way for everyone. I can see it'd be better for me if I could flex to each individual."

"Yes, it would," I agreed. "That would be another way of giving yourself a promotion."



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When he started paying attention to the executives, it was apparent who his supporters were. He began to lunch with them individually. Aside from learning new information, he found out an important secret: stop talking about his promotion.

He told me, "Everyone knows I want the promotion. So every time I ask about it, I look impatient. I need to prove I can *do* the job instead of just talking about it."

An important lesson indeed!

He went on. "I can see that being patient about the promotion is part of clicking out."

"This is great, Arturo. You're [creating a brand for yourself](#). That's going to help you get your promotion."

Delegate

When the talk turned to delegation, I said, "If you're going to give yourself a promotion, you need to stay at the highest altitude you can. That means you won't have the capacity to spend too much time down in the details."

"Yeah, so I'm learning!" he said.

"Here's how I picture this. Suppose that after your promotion, your office is going to move from here on the 24th floor up to the 40th floor. If you have to leave your desk on 40 and zip down to 24 every time you need to get something done, you aren't going to get much done!"

"Plus, I'd be absent from my post a whole lot!" he said, building on the image.

I told him that earlier in the year, I had worked with an executive who struggled to work "on the right floor." She was extremely slow to delegate. It held her back; she had no capacity for higher-level work. "She kept getting off on 24 and doing her old work, even though all her furniture had been moved to 40."

"I don't want to be like that," he said. "But if I don't know all the details I've always known, it's going to backfire on me."

"How so?" I asked.



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"Because one of the senior people will ask me for the details. And I won't know them."

"That's right, you won't. Because you'll have given yourself a promotion. You'll be operating at a higher level. But that's why you have a team. And that's why it's important they're firing on all cylinders."

He looked chagrined. "Well, uh, my people aren't as well-developed as they should be."

"Then let's talk about how you can develop them. Besides, you probably won't get your promotion until you prove you can develop a top-notch team."

We spent much time discussing specifics about [delegating](#), not only to his team, but also to his [executive assistant](#). He hadn't maximized her yet. We also discussed [developing his people](#).

Communication

We examined his opportunities for communication. His list included his one-on-one meetings with his boss, presenting at her staff meeting, project meetings, his own staff meetings and the lunches with his supporters.

I said, "Challenge yourself to talk at a higher level in each of those settings."

"How would that sound in, say, my staff meetings?"

"I can tell you what's been helpful for other people in their staff meetings," I offered.

"Please."

"People share what they're hearing from their bosses. They talk about what's out on the far horizon. They talk long-range."

"This is like clicking out, right?"

"Very much so. You're going to resist talking about the streets and boulevards that are your everyday altitude. You're going to begin talking about the broad landscape and the bigger picture."



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"I can see how that would help me communicate a little higher. That's helpful." Indicating the view outside, he said, "This view is so familiar to me I could describe it in my sleep. It's going to be hard to talk as if I'm actually seeing the view from the 40th floor."

But he worked on it. He found that, with practice, he could communicate at a higher level.

He developed his skill in each of the four factors: visualize, network, delegate and communicate. Seven months after our coaching ended, he called to say he'd gotten the promotion officially. Developing those four factors had given him *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™.

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