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PURSUING A PROMOTION 2020

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This month's coaching conversation is with a high-performer who was passed over for a promotion. Together, she and Tom identify tools to make sure she doesn't get passed over again.

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No Self-promoting

Ailsa had missed a promotion because, as her boss told me, "She doesn't feel like a senior vice president yet."

But everyone liked Ailsa. People agreed she'd be getting her promotion someday. To speed that day along, her company gave her a coach – me.

Within the first hour of our first conversation, Ailsa said, "You know, I could have done this differently. I was not at all self-promotional. I never went on some marketing campaign to get the position. I thought not talking about the promotion was the right thing to do. Just get on with my work. Clearly that strategy sucked!"

She said it in a way that made me laugh.

She went on. "I think some people saw my silence as arrogance. Like I just assumed the position was mine and I was just waiting to get crowned. But I thought I was playing by the rules!"

I made a 'sorry' face.

“So look,” she said, “I don’t want to miss the train the next time it comes around. If you can make sure that next promotion has my name on it, you bet, bring it on.”

I held up my hands to say ‘whoa!’ I said, “Ailsa, I’m never going to know what’s the ‘right thing to do.’ You know the culture here, I don’t.”

“But we can talk about some things to try, right?”

“For sure!” I said.

“So let’s talk!”

Over our months together, Ailsa and I discussed different factors she might try, always with the intention of positioning herself for a promotion. What follows are conversations about some of those factors.

“Give Yourself the Promotion”

Early in our conversations, I put forward the thought that she might give herself the promotion.

“If I could, I would!” she laughed.

I said, “What if everything you did, everything you thought of, you did as if you were already an SVP?”

She considered. After a while she smiled, and said, “There used to be this saying. ‘Dress for the job you want, not the one you have.’”

“That saying’s still around,” I said quietly.

“Well, this is like that. You‘re saying I should think like the job I want, not the one I have. I like that. You know what I just pictured? I used to do this thing with maps when I was a kid. I loved looking at maps. Sometimes I’d get super focused on one little dot on a map. I’d get really close and I’d imagine the town inside that dot and everything that might be there. I zoomed way in. Then other times I’d be way zoomed out, imagining the map from a plane, seeing the big patterns. You’re telling me to look at the bigger map.”

“How would that be for you?” I asked.

“Listen, I think I already do in a lot of ways. It’s why I was so disappointed about not getting the promotion. But you’re saying do it consciously.”

“Right. So what would consciously look like?”

She thought but got no traction.

“Can I tell you one way I talk about all this?” I asked.

“Go,” she said.

“If you want to give yourself the promotion,” I said, “you have to ‘click out.’ Just like with you and the maps.”

“Zooming out?” she asked.

“Yeah. Picture this. The work you do, every day, all that complexity, it’s laid out like a map. And to get your work done, you have be clicked in on this map. You have to be seeing rooflines and backyard fences and detached garages. Being clicked in like that is a good thing. That’s where you need to be to get the work done.”

“But you’re saying I could give myself a promotion if I click out,” she said. “Try to see neighborhoods and avenues and freeways. See the bigger map!”

She thought a second more then said, “I can really see this helping my one-on-ones with Jorge.” Jorge was her boss. “The more I click out with him, the more I see what he sees, the more I’ll talk his language. Excellent!”

Networking

When we discussed networking, Ailsa 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.”

“Like there’s a favor being asked?”

“Yes, or some ulterior motive. So it always feels fake. And in this case, it’d be true! I’m there to be a candidate. I’m putting myself forward for a reason.”

“Is this a bad thing?” I asked.

With a jerk of recognition, she said, “I do make it sound that way, don’t I?”

“And I don’t think it is. I think part of being a good candidate is to be sure you get to know people. These are your people. Be a good detective. Do your homework!”

Ailsa and I discussed 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?

As she began to observe the executives more closely, she noticed that each had a particular line of questioning they preferred. She said, “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. But clearly it wouldn’t take that much for me to flex to each individual.”

“I’m glad you think you can flex your style, Ailsa.” I said. “I think leaders who can flex their styles have a big leg up. Go for it.”

Ailsa made plans to have lunch with the executives individually.

We discussed whether she should or shouldn’t mention the promotion. She decided that if they brought it up, great, she was happy to talk about it, but that, no, she wouldn’t be the one to bring it up.

After she’d been lunching with people a while, she found that with some people the topic came up right away and they talked about it openly. Other people never mentioned it. She wasn’t sure what to make of it, but she was comfortable not being the person who “promoted” the topic of her promotion.

As she prepared for her lunches, we dove into another topic together – personal branding. Did she want to brand herself? If so, how would she do that? Our conversations about that is next month's episode of *The Look & Sound of Leadership*.

This Executive Coaching Tip is based on one originally published in September, 2014

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Core Concepts:

- Ailsa chose to NOT be self-promotional. In your organization a more vocal approach may be effective.
- Click out. Think from a higher altitude. Give yourself the promotion.
- Networking is not evil. But have intention. Be a good detective.

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