



The 7 Characteristics of Top Promotion Candidates

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Getting promoted at work is a great feeling. More money, more responsibility, the respect of your colleagues and the admiration of the organisation you work for. All great reasons to strive for promotion. But it's hard work and often it doesn't appear obvious what you need to do to get promoted – let alone do it again and again, so that you rise to the top of your profession.

I've promoted hundreds of people over the years and the diversity of talent in the market never ceases to amaze me. Thankfully the days of just promoting people with a top university degree and the 'right background' are long gone. Organisations have woken up to the fact that for them to succeed in the hyper competitive marketplace that the world is today, they need people with more about them.

The top characteristics

This topic led me to a really interesting series of conversations with a number of fellow partners at my consulting firm. I wanted to develop a consensus on just what are the characteristics that we most commonly see in top promotion candidates? As you can imagine, lots of ideas came up and a number of different themes were mentioned, but fairly quickly the same characteristics started to surface again and again.

Interestingly these same characteristics were mentioned irrespective of service line or geography. From the UK to India, Germany to the US, and Brazil to Australia – no matter who I spoke to, the partners in those territories said the same thing.

And when I took my list with me to talk to senior people at other large organisations about it, they too mentioned the same characteristics again and again. It didn't matter what the sector was they were working in, the size of the organisation or even the prevailing culture in their business.

There are of course basic qualifiers for promotion – being good at your job helps! Meeting or preferably exceeding your performance metrics and crafting a well thought through business case are also pretty important. (Although it's worth noting that all of those things can be worked around). But those things aside, what I've compiled below are the common characteristics sought after by the world's leaders when assessing the top promotion candidates.

1. Inquisitive



People who are inquisitive are interested in what is going on in the world around them. They're always asking questions, meeting new people and reading up on topics. They want to understand and, importantly, their interests stretch beyond their own narrow field of expertise.

They put a real emphasis on their own self-development and are constantly looking to learn new things. These are the people that will challenge the status quo and are genuinely on the look out to improve everything they are involved in.

2. Self aware

Being self-aware isn't some kind of spiritual state of mind. At its most basic, it's understanding what you are good at and what you are not good at. And being open and honest with those around you on those two points.

Self aware people are constantly striving to improve themselves and will have a ready answer for that common interview question "What are your development needs?". And I don't mean the usual crass responses of "I work too hard" or "I have very high standards and expect the same high level of quality output from others". If you think you're being clever by using examples like that when discussing your development needs, think again!

To be considered self-aware requires that you genuinely understand what you need to improve on at every stage of your career. Ideally you should have plenty of evidence of lifelong learning and development – a track record of development needs that you have addressed and ones you are still working on.



3. Open to criticism



This is one of those characteristics that really separates the women from the girls and the men from the boys. Lots of top candidates fall foul of this. They are good at most things. And they know they're good. So when they receive criticism, or negative feedback, they get defensive.

Rather than accept the feedback and work out what to do with it, they spend their time and energy defending themselves. They try to prove that the feedback isn't true or that they've been misunderstood.

The very best candidates are always accepting of criticism or negative feedback. They seek to understand it better and then work out how to use it to improve themselves.

4. Got an opinion

Having an opinion on things is important. Firstly, no one likes a 'fence-sitter' – the kind of person that is always hedging their bets in case what they say is wrong or is disagreed with.

Secondly, having an opinion demonstrates you have confidence in yourself and your understanding of a situation or topic. It shows that you are informed and have given thought to the subject.

It absolutely DOESN'T mean you are always correct. You should always be open to debate and other people's views. And to be willing to change your opinion when faced with new facts or a good argument.



5. Informed



Good candidates know what's going on in the world. I don't mean the minutiae of the ins and outs of politics in Madagascar (unless you live and work there, in which case it might be quite useful), but more generally.

Having an interest in the world around you means you can engage more intelligently and

confidently in conversations and also understand the impact on your industry, sector or clients' businesses.

For example:

- What sectors are booming and why?
- Which sectors are struggling?
- What's going on geopolitically (e.g. US – China trade wars; EU politics; recessions in the major economies, etc).

It doesn't take much. Regularly read a good quality newspaper, magazine or news website (I stress 'good quality' – try to avoid ones with political agendas). The Economist is an excellent choice (other magazines are available...) for getting regular updates on what's going on in the world.

6. Team player

Being a team player is fundamental to everything you do. Why? Because it's almost impossible to truly succeed at anything on your own. A good team not only increases capacity, but also brings together diverse skills, experiences and capabilities.

A good team player knows their place in the team. They understand their role and their responsibilities and they carry them out to the best of their ability. In sports a defender doesn't spend most of their time trying to score, whilst leaving their own goal undefended – that's not their role, and they would be letting their team down.



Great team players also play their part in creating a good dynamic in the team. They don't try to claim undue credit or duck responsibility. They bring people together by helping other individuals in the team to play to their strengths and they strive for inclusivity, ensuring everyone is heard.

Ultimately being a team player is about demonstrating that you understand that you only succeed when the team succeeds.

7. Leadership potential



People often think that being a team player and being a leader are mutually exclusive, but nothing could be further from the truth. True leaders inspire others and that's only possible by being part of the team. Also, it doesn't matter how senior you are, you'll still have peers that you need to work with – even the CEO has to work with the board!

Leadership potential is really difficult to put your finger on. But it's the most sought after characteristic in everyone that I spoke to. The reason it's difficult to define is because it's actually a combination of all the above characteristics. But in addition it's the ability to inspire others, to think strategically and to set long term goals for more than just yourself.

Leaders come in all shapes and sizes, but the good ones demonstrate many, if not all, of the characteristics shown above. If you're striving for promotion at your workplace, you could do far worse than to start to demonstrate many of these characteristics. Don't leave it until the morning of the interview to read a newspaper for the first time in months and hope that's enough to get you over the line!

The next step on your promotion journey

If you want to get promoted, and continue to progress through your career, make these characteristics the bedrock of your behaviour from now on.

However, how you behave and how you show up at work is only part of the battle in trying to get promoted. There is also the complicated task of navigating the promotion process.

From crafting a winning business case and personal case, to identifying and managing your key stakeholders, to smashing the promotion interview and subsequent question & answer session – navigating the promotion process is a serious undertaking.

Most people achieve it through trial and error. And there's a lot to be said for that – we all learn from our mistakes and become better people for having made them. But what if you could learn from other people's mistakes?

What most people don't realise is that getting promoted is actually a skill. One that can be learnt. And that if you follow the tried and tested process, it's a pretty simple skill to master.

I've developed a step-by-step guide to getting promoted, based on my years of experience of getting to the top of my profession and supporting hundreds of candidates through the process. I explain exactly how to navigate all the challenges and position yourself perfectly for promotion by:

- Creating a business case that makes the most of any situation;
- Building a personal case that perfectly articulates why you are the top candidate;
- Developing a stakeholder map to manage the politics of promotion to ensure that whenever and wherever conversations about you are being had, there are people in the room equipped to argue your case;
- And preparing you for the best interview presentation of your life



Take a look at my website www.PlayTheRealGame.com. There's loads of additional advice, including my comprehensive promotion training course. I take you through the process one step at a time, highlight the pitfalls I've seen many candidates (even great ones!) fall foul of and provide the route-map to promotion that works. I've seen it succeed time and time again and I'd love to share it with you.

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