

Why am I not being promoted despite strong performance?

In coaching sessions, I am often confronted with the question from coachees: why are they not being promoted despite delivering excellent performance? Believing that even better results will bring them closer to a promotion, they double down on their efforts. However, this approach usually doesn't help. Irrational? Not necessarily!

Peter Näf

A client who came to me for a personal and professional assessment was working as a subject matter expert in a large corporation. He had developed new, highly successful services in collaboration with clients and was managing one of the company's most important key accounts. As an innovative, entrepreneurial go-getter, he felt underchallenged and unhappy in his rather administrative role. He therefore approached his supervisor to position himself for a promotion - but without success. Why doesn't his manager take it upon themselves to develop such a valuable employee?

Supervisors have their own agenda

Let's consider the following hypothesis to explain this: the supervisor manages several employees, some of whom perform better than others. Let's further assume that my client is performing more successfully in his role than his colleagues. In such a case, supervisors may be inclined to promote a less successful employee - because something needs to change with that person anyway, and perhaps they will do better in a new role. Promoting my client, on the other hand, would create a new area of concern where everything had been running smoothly up to that point.

In such situations, I often observe the following behaviour in my coachees: interpreting the lack of

promotion as a sign that they're not yet good enough for the next level, they strive to become even better in their current role. But there's a catch.

Don't make yourself indispensable

By doing so, they make themselves indispensable in their current position, giving their supervisors even less reason to change a successful setup. So, what's the solution?

I see two key strategies: First, it's often not about improving performance, but about increasing visibility. Especially employees who do their job well without drawing attention to themselves often go unnoticed by their managers, who then underestimate their top performers. These employees need to make their achievements visible through storytelling, as I explained in my article «Why success doesn't speak for itself».

Second, it's important for employees to express clearly and unambiguously how important a promotion is to them. There are employees - often not the best ones - who make this need obvious, while my client expressed his desire rather cautiously. If a supervisor must choose between promoting the loud employee who might leave otherwise, and my client, whose dissatisfaction doesn't seem urgent, the choice becomes obvious.

This kind of management behaviour may not be visionary or entrepreneurial, but it is rational in the short term. After all, to loosely paraphrase an economic principle by Keynes: «In the long run, we will all have left the company».

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