

The New Path to the C-Suite: Why You Can't Count on a Promotion to Reach the Top (and Strategies for Actually Getting There)

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Passed over for a promotion or struggling to find your footing near the top of the career ladder? You're not alone. A feeling of "being stuck" is increasingly par-for-the-course for mid-career professionals. Perhaps you advanced quickly to a director or vice president-level position but now have hit a plateau in the middle. That coveted corner office with the executive leadership team is just one or two promotions away, but the promotion pace has stalled. If you've been with your current company for three years or longer, it's natural to wonder what's next. Will you reach the C-suite here or do you need to look for opportunities elsewhere? What can you do to accelerate your advancement timeline and take control of your future?

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When you reach mid-career, you have fewer advancement milestones, and each of these is further apart. Advancement now depends not only on past performance but also on position availability. If the senior leadership team at your company is staying put, then there's simply no opportunity for upward mobility, regardless of your qualifications. Making the jump to C-suite at another company can also be a challenge. An opening for CFO, CTO or CMO won't be posted online. Without an inside connection, you won't know about this opportunity or be able to apply. This leaves mid-career professionals in a Catch-22: they can't count on promotions to reach the top at their current company, and they can't count on a job posting to get a foot in the door at another company.

As a Talent Acquisition Specialist, I work closely with professionals facing these challenges every day. No matter your circumstances, you *can* take control of your professional trajectory and reach the C-suite. This guide covers four of the most common questions mid-career professionals ask with actionable, strategic recommendations.

Pathways to Promotion: What Does It Take to Reach the Top?

"How do I align my talents with the right company and leadership team?"

There's no magic bullet for securing a promotion. Some criteria, such as demonstrating technical expertise, a proven capacity for strategic leadership, and general business acumen, are within your control. You can find mentors, join networking groups, and participate in continuing education to sharpen these skills and broaden your experience set. Other criteria, like a senior-level retirement that creates advancement opportunities, are out of



your control. In this sense, reaching the C-suite can feel a bit like dating to find that forever relationship: timing matters just as much as compatibility.

That said, there's no reason to sit back and wait for the opportunity to come to you. Your daily actions are key to setting the stage for success and staying ahead of the curve. In executive recruiting, we call professionals who do this "[super employees with a sixth sense](#)." To outsiders, these professionals seem to have an innate understanding of what needs to be done and how to do it. It's not that they have a crystal ball— they've simply chosen the right environment for their talents and are proactive in their daily work. As you consider your own advancement trajectory, start by asking these three questions.

1. Am I at the right company?

It's hard to be a super employee if your talents and values don't align with both your company's needs and your direct supervisor's needs. Study the preferences and goals of your company at large and your direct supervisor, paying close attention to what your supervisor values. Does your supervisor value what you bring to the table and recognize your success? If you think you're acing your job but your supervisor thinks differently, there's a fundamental misalignment that needs to be corrected. More broadly, if you're a big-picture thinker with out-of-the-box ideas but your company needs a taskmaster who will keep the trains running on time, this position is not going to play to your strengths. Choose an environment where you can thrive.

2. Am I proactively positioning myself for success?

As a mid-career professional, you face a delicate balancing act. You're often in a position with your current company that requires you to execute organizational priorities even if you're not the one setting these priorities. It's easy to fall into a habit of task management rather than genuine leadership, which can create the perception you aren't quite ready for the top.

To fix this perception, start by honestly assessing your daily workflow. Do you use a time management tactic to set aside time each day for big-picture thinking or are you still jumping from one seemingly urgent task to another? Next, consider your leadership style. Is your [leadership style aligned with your values](#)? Do you bring intentionality to daily team interactions or are you defaulting to a "my way or the highway" approach? You are responsible for your team's performance and micro-culture. Taking the initiative to improve your leadership skills and set aside time for strategic thinking can go a long way towards improving your advancement potential.

3. Am I stuck in my current role?

It's important to differentiate between being impatient with the current pace of promotion and genuinely being stuck. In general, a cause for concern is being in the same role for three years or longer with no new opportunities and without gaining additional skills or experience. Ask yourself, "Are there opportunities for upward mobility or is the current leadership team staying put?"

In addition to promotional opportunities, consider the bigger picture. Do you genuinely enjoy working with your clients, your co-workers and your company's leadership, or are you ready for a change? Perhaps you're seeking a company with greater work-life

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balance, or maybe you need more purposeful work. Or, maybe you're feeling disengaged and need a fresh challenge. Take time to consider what you genuinely need from your next step. While a bump up the org chart is nice, if other issues are contributing to your current dissatisfaction, a new title won't fix these problems.

Asking for a Promotion: Framing the Conversation Around Excellence

Asking for a promotion puts you in a vulnerable position: you're putting yourself forward to be judged and you could be found 'not worthy' – a potentially embarrassing and uncomfortable outcome. Of course, you can't assume that an organization will take care of you simply because you're doing a good job. Your company is looking out for their best interests, not yours, and at the end of the day, you can't get what you don't ask for.

I always coach professionals to remember that [a promotion is not a single conversation](#) but a series of conversations about your impact potential. Your supervisor needs to hear consistently "I want to be sure I'm not just doing a good job but an excellent job." Then, prove your point by proactively taking steps towards professional growth. For example, if the next role requires significant business development responsibilities, what can you do now to demonstrate your ability to bring in new clients, in addition to acing your current responsibilities?

One surefire way to not get promoted is to act like it's a done deal. Expecting to be promoted based on tenure or even past accomplishments, rather than your potential, will set yourself up for disappointment.

Passed Over for Promotion: What Happened?

"How do I objectively assess why I've been passed over for a promotion – is it me or the company?"

Being passed over for a promotion can feel like a tremendous setback, especially at this stage in your career when promotion opportunities are fewer and less frequent. If you've hit (or exceeded) all your numbers, it can be difficult to understand why you didn't make the cut. Put your emotions on the backburner and turn an objective eye towards why you were not promoted.

Promotions to the executive leadership team are based on future potential, not just current performance. Some common reasons within your control include:

- Lacking the right hard skills to do the job (e.g., analytical skills)
- Lacking the right soft skills to do the job (e.g., leadership or teamwork skills)
- Difficulty taking or applying constructive feedback
- Lacking initiative (e.g., slow to identify problems and/or propose original solutions)

In some cases, it's not you but the company. Perhaps the company feels they need fresh vision, leadership or change management expertise to shift business directions and they don't believe you're in a position to provide this guidance. Or, perhaps you're in the wrong environment for your skills. As discussed earlier, if you're a big ideas person but the company needs a taskmaster, you're setting yourself up to struggle.



Finding Opportunities Elsewhere: When and How Should You Change Companies?

“If a promotion at my current company won’t take me to the C-suite, what will?”

If you’ve reached the conclusion that promotions won’t be taking you to the C-suite at your current company – and that’s an important professional milestone for you – then it’s time to consider opportunities at other organizations. Start with the following:

1. Identify what’s missing from your current experience set.

Do you need more direct exposure to business development to prove your value to a company? Do you need the opportunity to manage a department budget or run a team with 20+ people? Whatever skills or experience you feel is holding you back, seek out jobs that will give you this exposure and fill in the missing pieces.

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2. Make the market work for you.

Market dynamics may be outside of your control, but they can have a major impact on your transition potential and upward mobility. Failure to fully understand the market could lead to unrealistic expectations or even cause you to overlook new opportunities. As you evaluate potential companies, consider how these companies fit within the current marketplace. Are these companies in growth mode or reacting to market pressures? Are they highly specialized or do they offer a broad range of general services? Take time to understand your personal preferences and current market direction, and adjust your search accordingly.

3. Choose companies that value what you bring.

Again, it all comes back to choosing the right place for you. An employer’s reputation can give you a general idea of what to expect. Use the interview process to drill down into the company culture and ensure your talents and work style will be the right fit for the company’s culture and your supervisor’s needs.

Charting a Path to the Top: How an Executive Recruiter Helps

“How can an executive recruiter serve as a career ally?”

Navigating a mid-career change is tricky even under the best of circumstances. For most professionals, discretion is key. You don’t want to tip off your supervisor that you’re considering new opportunities until you have your next step lined up. Initially, even finding time to refresh your resume and LinkedIn profile may be a struggle. An experienced executive recruiter can be a critical ally through this process, serving as a sounding board on everything from promotion potential to compensation expectations. The right recruiter can also help prepare you to navigate the interview process, getting your resume in front of receptive hiring managers for executive positions that may never be formally advertised.



In all likelihood, recruiters are already searching for you— just be sure you can be found. Spend a few minutes to optimize your LinkedIn profile and you'll start getting recruiter calls almost immediately. Listen to their messages and call back recruiters who have interesting opportunities.

Even if the opportunity they present doesn't match your current advancement goals, let them know what it would take (salary, responsibilities, location, etc.) to consider a switch. They'll keep an eye out for the right position— all with no time investment required from you. When the time is right, a recruiter can help kick-start your search in three key ways:

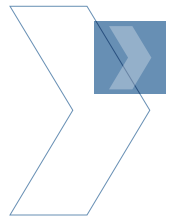
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- 1. Market intelligence.** How well do you know what's going on in your industry? Working for a single company for several years can give us a very myopic view of industry trends and challenges. An executive recruiter is in touch with professionals at companies throughout your industry every day. They have a wealth of market intelligence and know which companies are looking to hire, which skill sets and experiences are most in demand, and how much companies are willing to pay for top talent. Recruiters also have a broader geographic perspective. If you're open to relocation, recruiters can point you towards the best locations for success.
- 2. Employer brand intelligence.** Successfully navigating a mid-career transition is not easy, especially when the stakes are so high. You want to pick a company with an open pathway to the top, but accurately assessing promotion potential from the outside can be tricky. Experienced executive recruiters will have placed professionals at top companies throughout your industry. Not only do they have invaluable contacts, they also have inside intelligence into what it's really like to work at different organizations.

Does an organization's external employer brand match up with internal on-the-job reality? While it's always good to take promises like potential promotions with a grain of salt, a recruiter can serve as a sounding board, helping you sort fact from fiction and think strategically about your next step. Finally, a recruiter can also help you see that the grass may not be greener on the other side. Perhaps you feel it's time to move on to new opportunities, but a recruiter may advise you to stick it out for the time being and cultivate a specific skill set that will improve your promotion potential.

- 3. Streamlined search process.** Between professional and personal responsibilities, actually finding time for your job search can feel impossible. Plus, since most companies won't be hiring top positions through online resume submissions, combing through job postings is not a wise investment of what little time you do have.

Rather than reactively responding to job openings, a recruiter evaluates your unique skill set and experience. Recruiters consider which companies would benefit most from your skills, and refine their search accordingly. In some cases, a recruiter might even work with a company to create a position that's tailored to fit your skill set and meet a new company need.



Paying It Forward

Once you reach the C-suite, the technical and functional expertise that helped you get to the top will matter less. You'll need strong leadership skills and a solid grasp of business fundamentals, enabling you to see the business through a strategy and value creation lens. Critically, you'll also be in charge of how you promote people, which can make or break company culture.

When people believe promotions are managed effectively, they're more than twice as likely to give extra effort at work and to plan a long-term future with their company, according to [HBR](#). To foster this belief, you need to be transparent about the dynamics of executive-level promotions and what employees can do to best position themselves for advancement. Helping employees across your company connect with their aspirations is critical to building a winning, cohesive team.

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If you observe valuable members of your team getting the same “stuck” feeling that you had, be proactive. Assess their prospects in the same way you assessed your own. Are they in the right role? Are they missing a type of experience? Are they lacking important soft skills? Have they not been given the chance to demonstrate their vision and leadership skills? Is there simple a lack of opportunity? Evaluate then work with them on a plan to get where they want to be— with a gentle reminder to pay it forward when they get there as well.