



## News

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# An Argument Against Promotion

## Steer Ambitious Planners Toward Learning on Road to Advancement

By Mark Dominiak, Special to TelevisionWeek

How many of you have had this experience as a supervisor responsible for a number of younger media professionals? Out of left field, a planner requests a meeting and proceeds to outline a litany of reasons why he or she needs a promotion and commensurate raise.

It's a troublesome situation from a couple of perspectives.

First, it is very hard on the fly to marshal the composure and rationale to have a proactive conversation about another's growth. A supervisor certainly doesn't want to be on the defensive in that type of conversation.

Second, because the junior person has taken the initiative to prompt a conversation, there is positive energy present that can be developed. A supervisor wants to ensure that the opportunity in the situation is not missed and that the momentum is used to both the planner's and the team's advantage.

### Refocusing Attention

When confronted with this situation, a supervisor needs to recognize that the planner has requested the conversation with one thing in mind: his own perceived need. Since it's likely no raise or promotion was pending, a supervisor's first reaction might be to explain why the request cannot be granted. That course of action will convert a positive action on behalf of the planner into negative energy. It shifts the dialogue from the planner's needs to the organization's needs, a sure way to miss an opportunity.

The best thing to do is to keep the focus of conversation squarely on the planner. Acknowledge his hunger and passion. Take some time to dwell on his skills and noteworthy things he has accomplished. According to Stephen Covey, the greatest hunger of the human soul is to feel appreciated. Investing time to highlight positives will genuinely foster a feeling of appreciation with the planner.

However, the focus of attention needs to shift from what the planner has said he wants (a promotion) to what he really needs. A planner's perspective is that he has become very productive, and most often that is indeed the case. Everything he's been asked to learn has been mastered; every task he's been asked to complete has been accomplished. From the planner's perspective, it's understandable that he would believe he should be rewarded for this achievement.

But at this point, it is incumbent on the supervisor to refocus the planner's attention, enlightening him on the broader career perspective. A great way to do this is to discuss the contrast between doing and leading.

A truism in most professions is that early in a career, almost all tasks an individual engages in are "doing" tasks: Call these reps and get rates, run these crosstabs or find out which of these media mixes generates the best result. These tasks are all very important, but in the end they're just the blocking and tackling that provides the raw information needed to build successful media efforts. The younger the planner, the more time he spends on the "doing" tasks required to generate this information.

On the other side of the coin are "leading" tasks. How are people and time managed to appropriately procure needed information, maintaining motivation and teaching along the way? How can the information be creatively utilized to solve a problem in an innovative way? How can the group integrate with the larger team to create better solutions? How does the team lead the client's thinking and sell in innovative solutions?

All of those leading tasks require people, vision and problem-solving skills that by and large have not been learned by planners immersed day-to-day in doing tasks. Yet when planners graduate from a planning position, many of the new tasks they will be responsible for will require exactly these skills they have not begun to think about, much less mastered. Supervisors must take the opportunity of the promotion conversation to give the planner perspective that a promotion for promotion's sake could set the planner up for failure.

Let the planner know that all of the quality work he has done has helped put him into a position to take the next step. The fact that the planner is taking the initiative to pursue a promotion is another positive step. In order to set him up for a successful promotion, the planner then needs to be encouraged to start attacking the skill set he will need for leading; the promotion conversation is a perfect opportunity to lay out an action plan to start learning those skills.

### **A Good Thing**

Support for the importance of refocusing can be found in the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. In his bestseller "Flow, The Psychology of Optimal Experience," Mr. Csikszentmihalyi discusses activities that provide the best experience for the participant. His point is that when a person's skill meets the challenge level inherent in an activity, the person enjoys a more fulfilling experience.

When a planner reaches for a promotion, he is demonstrating that he has mastered the skills his job description requires. Mr. Csikszentmihalyi suggests that when skills far exceed the challenges at hand, people get bored with their experiences. That can lead to frustration, which could contribute to lost productivity or the need to replace a departed planner.

This shouldn't suggest that a promotion will answer the need. Likely it's the opposite. Mr. Csikszentmihalyi believes that if a person is given challenges that far exceed his level of skill, he will essentially be in far over his head and panic or anxiety can result.

A supervisor needs to paint a picture for the planner of the dynamics of advancement. The planner must understand that what he needs isn't a promotion, but a disciplined plan that will help him build new skills and provide new challenges. When the planner can demonstrate he has learned what is needed to both do and lead, he will be ready for and have earned the promotion opportunity.

While this may not be the result the planner desired, there's a lot of value on the table: engagement on the part of a superior to better prepare the planner; exposure to new skills that will make for a better-qualified professional; new challenges; and, perhaps most important, appreciation that someone is looking out for his best interests.

There also are benefits for the team: Positive energy can be directed; what is assumed to be a valuable employee is given feedback, knowledge and support that will contribute to keeping him part of the team; a positive course of action is mapped out for growth; and no one is put in a position to fail. Simply granting the promotion could cause the newly promoted person to crash and burn, eating up team resources to fix problems and potentially throwing a wrench into planning activities.

### **Putting Knowledge to Use**

There also are actions that supervisors can take to lessen the number of promotion conversations or to help keep momentum moving forward after a conversation has occurred.

For example, when a scheduled review takes place, bring the notion of doing and leading into the dialogue. Not only does this prepare the planner for subsequent learning opportunities, it also serves to make the planner more diligent in how he views tasks and opportunities.

When delegating tasks and assigning responsibilities, a supervisor should do his best to ensure tasks and training fit the planner's needs. Weave in tasks that require the planner to learn new skills and push him into new territory. Keep an eye out for opportunities in the ebb and flow of work on an account for the planner to dive in and learn something. Maybe formal training sessions are available. Make sure the planner participates in those relevant to learning new skills.

Perhaps most important, supervisors need to keep the dialogue going with planners. Junior people don't take away epiphanies of learning only at review times or during a promotion conversation. They learn every day. Supervisors must do their best to shepherd junior talent along the way so that planners understand what's relevant, and why, in what they do every day. When supervisors can be involved in this way, junior people are better engaged, better energized and will appreciate the fact that others are vested in their career advancement.

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