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Is Your Boss Holding You Back?

Take advantage of these tips to move your career forward, even if your boss isn't supportive.

by Beverly Y. Langford, author of "The Etiquette Edge" and president of LMA Communication. Dr. Langford teaches management communication in the Robinson College of Business, Georgia State University.

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You like your job, and overall, things at work are going well. Your performance reviews are stellar, and you like your boss and your coworkers. You've put in the long hours and made considerable sacrifices, and now you are ready to reap the benefits of your hard work. However, when you try to talk to your boss about taking the next step, you sense that she doesn't want to go there.

A number of reasons explain your boss's reluctance to help you move ahead. You may be a critical part of your department's success. She knows she can count on you as the go-to person, and if she is a bit insecure about her own position, she doesn't want to risk losing good people.

Or, you may have a boss with ego or control issues. The department can only handle one superstar, and she's it. She may be using your accomplishments to enhance her reputation, and losing you would shine the spotlight on what she is or isn't doing. According to author Lynn Berger, your boss may applaud your work and offer you stingy encouragement, but the only career she's concerned about is her own.

Alternatively, she may genuinely feel that you aren't ready to move ahead.

If you aren't sure whether your manager's reluctance is real or your imagination, be on the lookout for these signs that your boss may be interfering with your upward mobility:

- Unwillingness to commit to a definite time for you to expect more responsibility or a promotion.
- Lack of guidance or training regarding specific areas for improvement that may be keeping you from moving to the next level.
- A "phantom" promotion that changes your title but doesn't come with more money or any additional responsibilities.
- Gushing praise about your work and how she doesn't know what she would do without you (probably means you're going nowhere because you make her life so much easier).
- Meetings in which you seem to reach tentative agreement about your career goals but nothing ever happens.

If these scenarios sound all too familiar, here are some suggestions for moving your career forward.

Learn how the system works. Nancy Friedberg, senior consultant at a national career advisory service, suggests that you find out what it takes to get promoted in the company. Do most up and comers have MBAs? Do people get promoted based on the amount of new business they generate? Talk to peers and other managers. How long do people usually stay in a position before they move ahead? Decide if you need to take steps to make yourself a better candidate for promotion.

Identify the job you want.

Don't just assert that you think you're ready for more responsibility or a promotion. Be prepared to name the position. Find out as much as you can about the one or two jobs that you recognize would be great next steps and figure out if you're qualified to make that move. Assuming you really are ready to fill that spot, you can design a campaign that is targeted and focused when you approach your manager about your career goals.

Meet formally with your manager and state your goals in specific terms.

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Once you have the information that you need, schedule a meeting with your manager. Jeb Blount, author of *Power Principles*, suggests an offsite location to move you out of the boss' power zone and create an even playing field. Ask specifically what you need to do to move to the job you are discussing. If your manager points out areas where you aren't ready for the next step, have him or her identify the training or experience you need, and set specific goals with time lines for closing the performance gap.

Whenever you meet with your boss to discuss your career goals, follow up in writing, summarizing the commitments that you both made. You will have a record if your manager's memory gets a bit fuzzy about his or her commitment. If your manager won't make a move now but promises to revisit the subject at a particular time, such as six months, mark your calendar and check in when the time draws near.

Show your boss that you consider her needs as well as your own.

Give your manager credit for helping you develop to the point that you are ready to move up in the organization. Acknowledge her leadership in preparing you for more responsibility. Blount suggests that you assure your manager that you will do whatever is necessary to make the transition smooth, including train the person who will take your place.

Volunteer for company-wide projects that put you in touch with other managers and peers.

Whether it's a fundraiser for a worthy cause or the company picnic, participate in projects that demonstrate your leadership and project management skills to others. In these semi social situations, you may have the opportunity to discuss your long-term goals and the contribution you hope to make to the organization. Many times, other managers will approach your boss to approach you for a position in their area. In a large number of companies, your manager can't refuse to allow you to interview.

In addition to internal activities, keep up your networking and involvement in professional associations, nonprofit organizations or political campaigns. If your diligent and professional efforts can't budge a boss who wants to keep you where you are, the promotion you want and deserve may come from another organization that recognizes your value and abilities and is willing to help you climb the ladder to greater success.

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