

Promotions: What Mom Never Told You!

Miguel Torrado, former Associate Commissioner for Personnel, tells it straight.

The Real Rules of the Promotion Game

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The most critical concept to grasp in playing the promotion game is perhaps the most difficult to accept. To compete on an equal footing we have to take individual responsibility for succeeding. It is up to each of us to figure what it takes to get ahead and to do it. Blaming our difficulties on others without examining what we need to do differently is a waste of time. It renders us power-less and slows us down. Accepting this responsibility can be a scary thing, sort of like getting rid of the training wheels when we were learning to ride a bike.

And yet, effectively taking control of your career, playing the game to win, is actually fairly straightforward. It boils down to playing the game by its real rules, and knowing what those rules are. No one talks about these rules, and in fact some folks don't even know they exist, but there is nothing secret or esoteric about them. They are just common sense. In fact you may have seen something similar to some of them in "how to get promoted" presentations. For me they are the distillation of some 30 years of experience playing the promotion game, not always successfully. If followed, these roughly two dozen rules will not guarantee a promotion, but will greatly increase your chances of getting one.

There is no one right way of grouping these rules, but for convenience I group them into "Prerequisites", "Basics" and "Advanced". A word of caution: these rules are not what some folks may want to hear, and they are not necessarily "politically correct." So skip the rest of this if you don't want a rough ride through the land of truth. On the other hand, you may want to buckle your seat belt and pick up a useful tip or two.

The Prerequisites:

Rule 1. Get a college degree. An associate degree is good, a bachelors better and a masters best. These days they are asking folks for a bachelors degree to be hired as GS-5s, and if you graduate with a 3.5 average you will be hired as a GS-7. At the other end of the grade scale almost everyone above the GS-12 has a bachelors and many have a masters; ditto for the senior executives. You do the math. Can you make it to the top without a college degree? Yes. Are you likely to? No.

Rule 2. Learn to write well, concisely and persuasively. Writing skills are the scarcest commodity in the Federal workforce. If you have them (and display them) you will be in demand. If you don't have them, get them. Take *at least* four courses in English composition at the local community college. And don't assume that you write well because you think you do; ask someone you trust to give you bad news to read some of your writings. By the way, one of the reasons for getting that college degree, particularly a masters, is that it's difficult to finish the degree without learning to write well. Why? Because writing well requires clear and disciplined thinking, usually the side product of a college education.

Rule 3. Learn the art of briefing. If it takes more than 20 minutes to brief your higher ups on some topic in which you are the reputed expert, you are not briefing them, you're torturing them. Learn to deliver your

message cogently and convincingly in less than 15 minutes. Learn how to use visual aids effectively. An effective 15 minute briefing before the right official will do more to advance your career than almost anything else, so practice your public speaking skills. The easiest way to pick up this skill is to join your local chapter of Toastmasters.

Rule 4. Keep a healthy leave balance. There are many reasons for this, but I will mention only three. First, it's nice to be paid while you are recuperating from an unexpected illness. I found that out when I had bad case of appendicitis. Second, if on the day you retire (yes, Lupe, the day will come) you are a GS-15 with the maximum amount of use-or-lose leave, you can cash it in and walk away with a check for \$20,000 in today's dollars. Third, and this is the clincher, if you never accumulate a leave balance, Federal agency culture has a name for you: leave abuser. And you will not be promoted, regardless of how good you are. Why? You are no good to your manager if you are not at the office to do your job.

Rule 5. Do your job well. You do not get promoted for doing your job; you get paid a salary for that. But if you do not do your job well, you will not get promoted. Is this fair? Depends on how you look at it. But like life, fair or not, that's the way it is. And, by the way, this also means doing your job long enough to be seen as "having paid your dues." This means that you should not expect to be picked up for a developmental program eight months into your first job, or for the next level program when you have scarcely finished the prior one.

The Basics:

So much for the prerequisites. Remember, prerequisites are those things that you have to do before they let you in the game. We need to move now to what I call the basics. "Basics" refers to the *techniques* of the game, like moving your feet side to side to the tune of a merengue. Further on we will talk about advanced rules, referring to the *art* of the promotion game, like improvising "pasos" without losing your rhythm.

The rules below assume that you have mastered the five prerequisites and are in the promotion game. Some folks have not. They *think* they are in the game, but they really are not, because they are, for all practical purposes, invisible to the "referees" (Mr./Ms. Selecting Official).

Rule 6. Know what you want. I'm about to give you the cosmic secret to happiness, so pay attention. *The secret to being happy is not getting what you want, but wanting what you get.* Getting promotion after promotion may seem like the way to happiness, but there are things to trade off and prices to pay along the way. In general, you can expect far more stress in your life as a GS-15 than as a GS-11. And getting that GS-15 may mean you have to move half way across the country away from friends and family, so you may have to face the added stress alone. Nothing wrong with wanting that 15, but there is also nothing wrong with being contented with a 12 in a great location with family around and good friends and colleagues surrounding you. Know what you want and how much you are willing to trade off for it. There is no need to be careful what you pray for if you are clear about what you want. The trick is to be a GS-15, or a GS-9, because that is what *you* want, not what someone else decided for you.

Rule 7. Dress for success. You've heard this one before, but no one ever defined it. Dressing for success means dressing two grades above your current one. If you are a GS-11, dress like the GS-13s dress in your office, assuming they dress properly. The reason is simple. You want to condition Mr./Ms. Boss, the selecting authority, to think of you as being two grades higher than you really are. When the opportunity comes to pick someone from a BQ list he/she will have no trouble visualizing you in the higher grade.

We all have the right to dress as we want at work (within reason), but we cannot avoid the impressions our dress causes others. And while we are talking about dressing for success, let me share what the unstated rule is in some agencies: coat and ties for men and skirts or conservative dresses, not slacks, for women. I did not make these rules, so don't blame me for them. They are not written anywhere, but they are powerful cultural mores. The point is not that a suit or a skirt is the only proper attire for feds. The point is that that is what our culture usually dictates. If you are having trouble with this concept, take solace in the fact that if you worked for SouthWest Airlines, suits and skirts would be completely inappropriate. Years ago I proposed casual Fridays for the component where I worked. My boss, a now retired member of the upper leadership, responded with a

frosty "No. How you dress reflects how seriously you take your work." Things have changed, but not that much.

Rule 8. Be the solution to someone's problem. You don't get promoted because you are smart, good-looking, educated, competent, well dressed and hard-working, although those things help. You get promoted because someone has a problem and you are the best solution. This entails two things. First, you have to be the best solution. Second, the person with the problem to solve has to know *you* are the best solution. One does not work without the other. Make sure your application shows your experience in the best light. Work at being seen as a problem solver and make sure that the higher ups know it. This last part is culturally tricky for Latinos who tend to believe that all they have to do is work hard and someone will notice. Not in the American workplace of 2001. Promote yourself elegantly y con sutileza. Don't be a smartass about it; remember that burro inteligente is an oxymoron.

Rule 9. Do more than your fair share. I know, it ain't fair. But you know what, they pay you and everyone around you for a full day's work. If you want to stand out from the crowd, do more than the crowd. If you were the boss, would you promote someone that does the same stuff everyone does, or someone who is always contributing beyond expectations? I knew you would see it my way!

Rule 10. Volunteer for everything. This, of course, is a corollary of the last rule, but it goes beyond it. How are you going to get to do more than your fair share if you don't volunteer? How are you going to get those extra brownie points, not to mention those interesting assignments, if you don't volunteer? The boss is having a bautismo de muñeca? Show some initiative and volunteer to organize it!

Rule 11. Get a detail. How many people have a grade higher than yours in your office? This is the number of promotions possible for you if you don't compete outside of your office. And this is an inflated number because, if you are a GS-11 and there are four 12s, two 13s and one 14, the number of possible promotions for you is not 7, but 3. The only way to expand the possibilities is to compete for promotions in other offices, across town, across the state, across the Region or across the country. (I told you that you needed to know what you wanted, didn't I?) And the only way you will be competitive for those outside jobs is to be known by the managers making the selections. Remember rule 8? One way to spread your legend is to get a detail, short or long, to other offices, to the Regional Office or even to headquarters. Be alert for detail opportunities and volunteer.

Rule 12. Get on a workgroup. Some federal agencies are very collegial organizations, which means their executives like to make decisions together. If a manager wants to jump off a ledge, she calls all her peers to the ledge with her, they handcuff their wrists to one another, and then she jumps. Honest. In practice, the way this works is that big decisions (and some not so big ones) are only made after a workgroup with folks from several components gets together to explore options and make recommendations. There are workgroups in individual offices, areas, regions and nationwide. Getting on one or more of these is a time-honored way to let your star shine brightly. Assuming, of course, that you contribute something significant to the objective of the workgroup. Joining one and not doing or saying anything is a sure way to kill your career. Another good thing about joining a workgroup is that you get to meet folks from other parts of your agency. This usually makes you a better employee, broadens your horizons and expands your network. Who knows, the chair of the workgroup may have a vacancy six months later and remember the smart cookie who helped her write the workgroup's report.

Rule 13. Go to Headquarters. SSA, my agency, is a typical agency. It has 65,000 employees, only 7,000 of whom are in Headquarters. And yet over 48% of GS 13-15 jobs, and more than 80% of SES positions are there. It's easy to see that the ratio of high graded jobs to employees is much better there than in the field. Not that there are no higher graded jobs in the field. There are, just not as many. So if you are in headquarters you have access to far more opportunities for higher graded jobs, making the odds of landing one that much better. Over the short term, spending some time in headquarters on a detail will make you a better employee in the field because you will get a better sense of the big picture and how the Agency works. This does not hurt your

chances of promotion in the field. (Alas, spending some time in the field would also vastly improve Headquarters employees, but we are limited to the realm of the possible here.)

Rule 14. Be mobile. If you ask any Senior Executive, he or she will tell you that they moved—and I mean *moved*—at least 5 or 6 times during their career. The classic career path at SSA is CR trainee to CR to supervisor to branch manager to district manager to area director to a stint in the Regional Office and then on to Headquarters, with a couple of long term details thrown in along the way. You think you're going to find all those jobs in your hometown? You have to be willing to relocate to where the opportunities are because the vacancy for the promotion you want next is not likely to be ready in your office when you are. Nothing wrong at all with being content with what you have where you have it. But make sure that that is the case because that is what you want. If that is your choice, be happy with it and don't envy the promotion that Pepita got two states down the road.

Rule 15. If you don't like your boss... This one ranks right up there with the cosmic secret to happiness, so let me whisper it in your ear. *If you don't like your boss, he probably does not like you either.* And if he/she does not like you, what are your chances of him/her giving you a promotion? So the logic is clear. If you don't like your boss, you're not likely to be promoted by him, so you better find a way to get a lateral and go work for someone else. Better still, work hard from the beginning at liking your boss (genuinely). This means working diligently to maintain a mutually enjoyable and productive relation. No different than working hard at other personal relationships that are important to you. And if you are the boss, (yea, there are Latino bosses!) this means understanding that no one is perfect and forgetting many of the small mistakes your staff will make. Remember boss, you are not perfect either.

Rule 16. Advancement will require sacrifice. When I first came to SSA headquarters in Baltimore, I was a GS-15 who wanted to be SES and who had just bought a house in Westchester County, New York. For two years I commuted *daily* those 228 miles. And ask me when you see me where I slept and how I took showers whenever the work day got so long that it was too late to go home. It makes for a really entertaining story, but it is not fit for print. Was it worth it? I'm not entirely sure. I got my SES, but I know that I was not as good a father and husband as I could (should) have been those two years. The bottom line is that it took sacrifice and not only my own. Advancement does not come cheap. Be aware of how much you're willing to pay for the next step up the ladder.

Rule 17. Apply for developmental programs. Some federal agencies have pretty nifty developmental programs at the national, regional and component levels. There are developmental programs for employees at every grade level above the GS-9 (If you can't get that far on your own, we need to talk). And most agencies work hard at making sure that everyone who applies competes on an equal footing. But there's a catch. There was this very pious lady in my hometown whose name was Lola. One day she realized that if she won the lottery, she could do many good deeds with the money. Convinced that this was what the Lord wanted for her, she prayed and prayed, but she did not win the lottery. So she prayed some more, but the next week she still had not won the lottery. This went on for several weeks and she could not understand why. So doña Lola went to church, and asked the Lord "why?" She knew it was His will, so she was confused. "Lord, what do I have to do to make your will come true. Tell me." And the clouds parted and a light shone upon Lola, and a voice came down and said... "*Lola, buy a ticket!*" You can't be selected for a developmental program, no matter how much the Agency wants to select you, if you do not apply.

18. If at first you don't succeed... don't sulk. You apply for a job and you are not selected. You apply for another one and you are still not selected. What to do? Well, here's what not to do. Don't get angry at management and start badmouthing them (remember rule 15). There may be a lot of good reasons why they did not select you even though they think highly of you. Are there other good candidates around? Does the selectee have more years of service than you, or (remember rule 1) more college education? In any case, you are far better off by approaching management nicely and asking for feedback than by going around sulking and complaining. Be ready to accept constructive criticism (not easy) and don't approach your supervisor with a

“What does someone have to do around here to get promoted?” attitude. If after trying this several times you are still not promoted, look for a transfer somewhere else.

Advanced rules:

Now it's time for the advanced stuff, the things you do after you have mastered the basics. There are not too many of these, so stay with me.

19. Learn to take risks. There are no sure bets in life. None. Which means that no matter what you decision you make or what you do, there are multiple possible outcomes and some of them ain't pretty to contemplate. And yet we make decisions all the time. So we take risks all the time without even thinking about it. It's when you have to take that chance consciously that fear strikes. Get over it. Learn to take a calculated risk and learn to distinguish a risk from a gamble. A risk is when there is a chance of losing but you know you can absorb the loss or recover eventually. A gamble is when you bet something you cannot afford to lose. Consider the possibilities, good and bad, of the alternatives you have in front of you. Assess the chances of the good and the bad happening to the best of your ability. Make a choice, and don't look back. Only death is irreversible. And remember, the biggest risk of all is not taking any.

20. Attend conferences. Attending work related conferences accomplishes several things, aside from seeing your quate and having a good time. First, you get up to date about what's happening in the rest of your professional world, from the latest budget woes to the local chisme. Second, you get to do some real networking, which includes meeting new people, but also a chance to talk one on one with senior managers and executives who are hunting for talent (and don't let them tell you different, they are **always** hunting for talent). Many an interesting and career enhancing detail has been obtained this way. Finally, and most important, conferences are an excellent way of showing that we Latinos are here, we have something to contribute, we have needs, and we support one another.

21. Be aware of agency culture. Sometimes It feels like we Hispanics get invited to a game of football, but we hear futbol (you know, what the Anglos call soccer). So we show up in little black shorts and striped shirts, while they show up in helmets and shoulder pads with an oblong ball, and we get creamed. We can win any game we play, for sure. As long as we know what the game is and what the rules are. Agency culture spells that out for you. And if you don't study it, you will try to score a goal when the agency wants you score a touchdown. Let me give you an example. There is a good old value in Hispanic cultures that says; “Keep your nose to the grindstone, do your work well, and don't worry. Someone will take notice and you will get promoted.” Not in the American workplace of the 21st century! See what I mean? Study what it is that the agency values and frowns upon, and work to adopt and adapt those values without changing who you are. This is tricky stuff, but well worth it.

22. Find a mentor. Not the kind that gets assigned formally, but the kind that you find on your own and with whom you have great chemistry. You want a natural, easy, mutually enjoyable relationship. And the mentor should be someone several grades above you, with lots of experience, and well respected in the Agency. The mentor must be someone who can give you bad news and constructive criticism about yourself without making you feel lousy. Let me say this again; the mentor must be someone that can tell you what you need to do differently that no one else will tell you. Ideally, the mentor should also have access to places and information you don't, and should be able to open doors for you. The best mentorial relationships lead to the mentee rising in the organization as the mentor rises. They also tend to last a lifetime and feel like a really close friendship with an older sibling. More than one mentor is also OK.

23. Different grades require different skills. The skills that made you a great analyst may help you be a better manager, but they are not enough. As an analyst you do, as a manager you ensure that others can do. A manager manages, an executive leads. These are all different skill sets, and dexterity at one does not confer success in the others. Learn what skills are required at the next level. This is not written in the PDs, but in agency culture.

24. Bring along those behind you. Do I really need to explain that? Just one thought. Before age 50 we keep score by how much we make, what grade we have, where we live, what car we drive, how we dress, etc. After

50, if we have learned anything, we keep score by how many people we help, how many young people we mentor, what we give back to our community. And remember, se hace camino al andar, you make a path with your footsteps. That path should be easier for those that follow because you walked it first.

I hope you have enjoyed these “rules” and that they help you. Remember that they are a work in progress and that your comments and contributions will help me improve them for the next group of readers—and a big “Thank you!!!” to those of you who have already helped me improve the rules. Send your thoughts and comments via e-mail to

Have a grrrrreat career!