

April 2015  
Podcast for Managers  
*Career Advancement Tips*  
**[10:58]**

**Host:** You devote a lot of your time as a manager to helping your organization succeed, to helping your employees do a great job. Today we're going to focus on *your* success, on how to boost your own career and move ahead. Our guest is John Beeson. He's a management consultant based in New York, a regular blog contributor to the Harvard Business Review, and he's the author of *The Unwritten Rules: The Six Skills You Need to Get Promoted to the Executive Level*. John, thanks for being here.

**John Beeson:** Thanks, Marianne. It's a pleasure to be with you today.

**Host:** We're going to spend about 10 minutes talking about how to move ahead in one's career. First, tell us, what are the biggest myths about career advancement that can get in people's way?

**John Beeson:** Well there are a number of myths that can get in the way of your career advancement, but let me highlight three that I find are real stumbling blocks for a lot of managers. First one is the notion that excellent performance by itself will earn you a promotion. You mentioned my book and in the process of researching the book, I had a number of off-the-record interviews with senior executives responsible for management promotions in their companies. There was a very clear consensus on this point that excellent performance is what they call "a non-negotiable," what one client called "table stakes," meaning it's the minimum required for you to be in the game for promotion, but it's rarely a differentiating factor.

The second myth: that it's all about who you know. Some managers think that promotional decisions in their companies are all political, that it's again, who you know. What I suggest is you flip that on its head and think about it this way -- that it's more about who at senior levels knows you and what impression you've created about your skills. That's important for you in terms of developing visibility and also some of the other career tips I'll talk about in a moment.

The third one I'd like to highlight is the belief that your performance review will necessarily give you the feedback you need to advance in your career. This assumption I find is flawed for two reasons. By definition, these reviews focus on your performance in your current job and your current level. They don't typically deal with the skills you need to display to move up to a higher level. Also, most managers are inhibited about giving even a top performing manager very direct candid feedback related to career advancement.

**Host:** So to advance in my career, what kinds of things should I be doing? Share some general career advancement tips with us.

**John Beeson:** Your starting point I believe is taking steps to tease out what I call “the feedback that really counts.” And by that I mean feedback within the organization about how you’re perceived by senior level people who will be involved in making decisions about the positions you’d like to move into. In most organizations, this kind of feedback is not easy and it takes some real finesse. What I suggest is that you try to set up a series of career discussions with as many senior managers who know your work as you can. And certainly include your direct supervisor. His or her input is important, and you don’t want the supervisor to think you’re trying to do an end run. In those conversations, solicit their feedback about the skills that you’ve displayed and what skills they think are needed for you to move ahead. As you have these conversations, your cardinal rule is to be open to their feedback and avoid anything that signals defensiveness, because that defensiveness will likely shut the other person down.

At the end of a productive career discussion, one summary question that I found to be very valuable is this: What are the one or two things above all others that would most build confidence in my ability to succeed at a higher level? That question tends to separate the wheat from the chaff in terms of all the feedback they may give you. For example, you might learn that although you are viewed as a highly valuable individual contributor, there is concern about your ability to delegate to others and a concern that you might get overwhelmed in a higher level position. Or you might hear that you are extremely results-oriented, which bosses like, but peers and co-workers, some of whom you would have to manage in a higher level job, describe you as a poor team player and one having sharp elbows. Right or wrong, it’s extremely useful for you to know such perceptions so you are in a position to counteract them.

Your next challenge is putting yourself in a position not only to develop those skills but equally importantly to demonstrate them to those who will be making promotional decisions. Some examples of steps you could take. One would be to work with your boss to see if you can be staffed on a high profile taskforce dealing with a strategic topic, a great chance to show your strategic skills. Or it could be joining a professional or a trade group outside the company that not only helps you build your network but can help you build and broaden your perspective on the business and the industry.

Another important step is to work to enhance your executive presence. So two suggestions in this area. One is try to find people you trust and respect who can give you feedback about your personal carriage, your poise, and your ability to maintain your composure under stress since these are all important components of executive presence. Also, work to develop your presentation skills since in many organizations your ability to speak in a compelling and confident way is an important component of executive presence.

**Host:** As far as approaching people for feedback within the organization, do you find most people are willing to give feedback, are open to that?

**John Beeson:** Couple things to keep in mind. One is to approach those people that you have worked with that know you and have signaled that they have some interest in your

career success. But when you have the conversation, it's also critically important to convey a sincere desire for feedback and a sincere desire to learn. Once the person understands that you want that kind of feedback, that you're open to it, that they can handle feedback that may not be 100 percent positive, they are more likely to give it to you. The important part is to talk to a variety of people if you can and look for common themes in terms of what the more senior people say, especially around skills you need to display or anything in your leadership that might be getting in your way.

**Host:** Do you have any special tips for Millennials, for Gen Xers, and for Boomers?

**John Beeson:** I think that all of the tips that I have just mentioned are very useful regardless of your career stage. But especially for people who are earlier in your career. My suggestion is that you be sure that you are both a problem finder and a solution seeker. And let me explain that. I've seen a number of younger employees who are highly astute at pointing out the problems in their organizations and then they drop those problems on the desk of their very harried boss and expect him or her to solve them and they feel very gratified. In reality, the employees who will distinguish themselves are those who cannot only identify a problem, but can build support for workable solutions. What I'm talking about is people who cannot only get something done but have the skills to build support in the organization to move things forward. That will distinguish you from others at your same level.

Let me also talk about those who are further along in their careers. Firstly, at this point in your career, you very probably have created a strong reputation for what you can and can't do and how you operate as a leader. As a result, it is very important for you to tease out the feedback that counts, as I mentioned before, to see if there's anything in your style that's holding you back. One other suggestion, it's a mental exercise, but it leads to some pretty pivotal decisions and it starts with thinking very deeply about how you can add the greatest value to the company and as a result, what skills you need on your team to allow you to play that value added role. I mentioned this because over time most of us get, quote, "heads down," end quote, just thinking about today's work that we need to get out the door. At an advanced career stage, those who are most likely to advance are the ones who will introduce new strategies, who can identify ways of significantly improving performance. So consider very carefully how you spend your time as a manager and the issues you need to get deeply involved in and conversely what are the issues, what are the areas of responsibility you need to be able to delegate to others. Then use that analysis to upgrade your team accordingly.

**Host:** John, what if I want to develop my leadership skills if I'm hoping one day to head the department or even run my own company?

**John Beeson:** In your career discussions try to get a sense of what those people who will make a promotional decision for department head view to be most critical. And then through your career discussions try to get a sense of what are the particular skills that will be used and under the microscope when they make promotional decisions to that level. I do a lot of coaching of executives and some of them will say, "What I would love to do at

some point in the future is found my own business and grow my own business.” And what I tell them is keep in mind that even though a lot of new businesses don’t succeed, a lot of them do and they grow. And the reason I emphasize that is that there are so many learning opportunities within your current organization that can be helpful to you in the future.

**Host:** John, thank you for sharing these excellent tips and strategies and for taking the time to talk with us today.

**John Beeson:** Well thank you. It’s been my pleasure.

**Host:** We were talking with [John Beeson](#), author of *The Unwritten Rules*. Follow him on Twitter [@johnrbeeson](#). On this website, read the helpful article [Managing Your Career](#). And for timely tips every month, be sure to sign up for our Managing People newsletter. Subscribe by going to the home page. Thanks for listening.