

Chapter 22

How To Stand Out And Promote Yourself

Not surprisingly, this is one of the most popular topics people requested me to write about. Many of us, whether because of our culture, the way we were raised by our parents or influenced by important people in our lives, believe that if we work hard, stay humble, don’t complain and let our work results speak for themselves, we will be rewarded accordingly. Well, most of us eventually learn that we aren’t going to get very far in our career with that belief. I was one of those people. From day one in my new career, I was all heads down doing my job. I was a good worker, never complained, created trouble or bragged about my work. I also wasn’t too excited about public speaking and I stayed away from speaking opportunities, especially with customers. Instead, I was happy to have my co-workers presented to the company executives and customers about our project which I had been a key part of. And of course, my team members ended up looking good and getting the credit, at least in the executives’ minds since they didn’t have any visibility of me and didn’t really know me.

I remember, to this day, about a meeting I had with my manager and her peers. When I was finished and started walking back to my office, I heard one of the managers commenting: “Michael just does his job, does what we ask him and never complains.” I think they meant that as a compliment, but looking back, that didn’t do justice to my career. Since they figured I was low maintenance and not one to complain, they didn’t know about my aspirations and felt little motivation to promote me when they already had people banging on their door for promotional opportunities.

Another example: after having been in the job for three years after graduating, I sat down for my annual performance review expecting a really good ranking. To my dismay and disappointment, my manager, Cindy, told me I was ranked in the middle of the pack, a mediocre ranking even though I delivered excellent results. According to her, other managers said they weren’t aware of my work and the results I produced. Basically I was invisible to them and they would not agree to give me a higher ranking. It was a humbling and a painful lesson for me. It taught me that I needed to take charge of my career and to make sure my work is known, valued and appreciated by not only my peers, but my manager, her peers and other executives. Over the years I got better at this as I observed and learned how other successful people conducted themselves.

In this chapter, we’ll discuss how you can go about promoting your accomplishments, making yourself stand out in the workplace while still maintaining the respect and healthy working relationship with your colleagues.

- **Nail the basics.** Before you can be considered a standout performer and a star in the workplace, you must establish a strong work foundation with your peers, your manager and other executives. This strong foundation means you establish a track record of being reliable, delivering on your commitments and doing what you say you will. This must be your work ethic and not something you do once and forget. You must continue to deliver on your commitments. Continue to build on the trust and credibility with the people you work with. Once you have established and

maintained your strong work ethic reputation, people will take you seriously when you want to promote yourself and management will be willing to give you more important and “high profile” projects which give you more opportunities to stand out and shine.

- **Be a great team player.** Go above and beyond to help your team complete the job, deliver results and meet their commitments. Go out of your way to help your co-workers when they really need it, as long as you don’t compromise your work. By doing this, you establish yourself as an important team player who puts the focus on the team and in turn, creates a positive impression in people’s minds. In addition, take the time to give credit and praise to your team members when they achieved a key milestone or did something well. A simple thank you or acknowledgement message to their managers would be greatly appreciated.
- **Become a persuasive communicator and presenter.** This is a must. I have highlighted this skillset throughout this book and I cannot emphasize this enough. In order for you to promote yourself, you must be visible. How you communicate, speak and present to various audiences determines to a great extent the impression people will have of you. If you are articulate and a good presenter, people will be impressed and form a positive image of you. I have seen numerous instances where company executives were effusive in their praise about someone who delivered an outstanding presentation for the first time in front of them. This positive impression will likely be a positive factor in that employee’s next performance evaluation. If you believe communication is a weakness for you, make it a priority to work on improving. Without this ability, you will face a steep uphill battle to get notice. If you demonstrate this skill, it will go a long way to help you achieve a successful career.
- **Look for opportunities to show your work.** If your work affects other teams or provides value to them, look for opportunities to share it with them. Request time in their manager’s staff meeting for you to come in to discuss and present. Although one of your objectives is to gain visibility, keep in mind that what you present or discuss must be of some interest to the audience. The topic should have a positive impact on the audience. Another idea is to use the time in the meeting to seek their input on something you and your team are working on. If some people in the audience have also been working with you, use the opportunity to give them credit and visibility in front of their manager. In the process, you are also making yourself stand out because you’re the one presenting. Make a point of doing this with different teams periodically.
- **Get face time with executives.** When you’re working on team projects, inevitably you and your team will be asked to review your project or give updates to company executives. When you have these opportunities, jump on them, prepare and deliver the best presentation you can. These are your chances to shine. Of course, it is a high risk and high reward situation. However, if you hit it out of the park, you will earn great stripes and valuable credit. If you perform poorly, it can have the opposite effect. It is a risk, but if you don’t take advantage of it, you will never be noticed. So embrace the opportunity, make sure you are prepared and give your best effort. Continue to look for opportunities to get in front of the executives to discuss specific ideas you have or are working on.

During my time as a Marketing Operations Director, I had a new manager after the previous manager took another position in the company. During the one year with the previous manager, I didn’t meet or present to company executives at all. A month into her new job and after I reviewed my work with her, Bridgette set up a meeting for me to meet with a high level executive team – a Senior VP, several VPs and Senior Directors, and to share with them the detailed worldwide business analysis I developed. That gave me a golden opportunity to highlight my work and get great visibility. At the same time, my new manager knew my work would be of interest to these executives who had wanted a simple way to regularly assess the company business worldwide, but had not been able to. I knew the subject matter well and I prepared thoroughly for my presentation, and as a result, my boss and I had a great meeting. The Senior

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VP commented that he didn’t even know the company had some of the data I presented and asked to be updated on a quarterly basis. I had a manager who not only highlighted my work to her management team, but in the process, also impressed her boss and other executives.

If you don’t have a manager with a keen eye for when to highlight the team, proactively work with your boss to identify opportunities to get in front of company executives. You can achieve this by showing your manager how your work is addressing a business need and would be valued by the executives.

- **Seek more face time with executives and other management teams.** Another way to get face time with executives is to ask your manager to take you to certain meetings he has with the executive team. You’re not looking to present, but to be there to support your manager, to be his right hand person. Whenever I have meetings with company executives to review progress of my team’s project or to update them on an initiative, I would take one or more of my employees with me. I would introduce them to the executives, let them know that my team is doing the work and they are there to back me up. Inevitably in the meeting, there would be times I needed them to provide answers to the management team. It was a win/win for my team and me. If your manager is not intuitively looking at these opportunities, take the initiative to encourage him to do so.
- **Get face time with customers.** If your job allows opportunities to meet, present and discuss company plans or other topics with customers, take advantage of it. Customer opinion carries a lot of weight with key company stakeholders, including sales people, their management team and executives. When you meet and present to customers, the Account Sales team is usually present and frequently, company executives would be there as well. You’re seen as a subject matter expert and if you come across as knowledgeable and skillful in managing customer interaction and you delivered a strong presentation, you will be sought after. Sales people aren’t shy about giving feedback and if you can help them with your ability to interact and communicate with customers, they will let your manager and the company executives know. A good reputation with the sales force is one of the best ways to help you stand out. The sales teams will make sure you get the recognition you deserve. Moreover, they will seek you out for more customer engagements. While this is a good thing, you need make sure this doesn’t take away the time or distract you from your core work responsibility.

When I was a product management manager, my new manager was not keen on having me travel to meet with customers. She was focused on cutting expenses and had not seen me present in front of customers to have confidence in my ability. On a customer event, we met with CIOs and IT managers to update them on the company plan and future technologies. In my presentation session, the Sales Executive team was present as well as my manager and her manager’s boss – Executive VP of Enterprise Group. A short time after I wrapped up my presentation, my manager walked up to me and told me the Sales Managers were impressed with my talk and wanted to request me to come out to meet with their important customers individually. After that, she couldn’t stop encouraging me to fly out to meet with more customers. Better still, the sales team’s feedback was reflected positively in my next performance review.

- **Volunteer to lead an important cross-functional project.** This will enable you to demonstrate your ability to lead a team to deliver results. This may be a high risk, high reward opportunity and you need to have confidence in your skills and ability to successfully lead this project. Find out all you can and assess the feasibility of the project as well as your own workload before volunteering. If you want to take this project on and your plate is full, negotiate with your manager to remove some of the less important tasks from your plate.

One other idea to make a name for you is to look for an opportunity to work directly with one of the executives on a project they need help on. For example, when I was a manager in the Product Operations group, I found out that the Senior Vice President of the Product Operations business

unit needed someone to be a part-time chief of staff to help him manage his organization. I learned that it would take ten to twenty percent of my time for six months. After discussing with my manager who agreed to reduce some of my work load, I took it on and did it for a year until the Senior VP was able to hire a full-time Chief of Staff. The insight I gained on how a high level executive worked with his team and other executives, about the decision making process as well as how he dealt with the organizational challenges and company politics was invaluable. In addition, I had great exposure and developed good relationships with people across organizations that paid dividends later on.

- **Be an expert in a high demand area.** Many respected people who stand out in their company are also recognized for their expertise in a particular area. They could be recognized as an expert in a new and emerging technology, a master presenter or as a business analyst guru while someone else could be recognized as a creative marketing expert. These are the “go to” people who other people reach out for assistance. These are the people company executives assign important work. When I was in Product Operations, we had a person who was responsible for Business Analytics and Metrics. She was the person our manager and other executives went to when they needed a quick turnaround business report, a deep dive analysis on a business problem, or analyses to prepare them for upcoming meetings with industry analysts. Everyone knew her as the go to person in the business analytics area.

Typically in your department, organization or company, there are “gaps” in one or more areas due to lack of people with the right skills, expertise or people with already too much work on their plate. By talking to your and other managers to find out what important areas are not being covered or, if they had the means, where they would invest the resources is an excellent way to identify areas where you can take the initiative. Managers frequently are forced to focus on short-term goals which leave them with little time for longer term priorities, such as what the company needs in the future in order to continue to compete successfully.

In addition, in your research, you may discover an innovative idea that will help improve your company business. If you do, develop a proposal and discuss it with management. If they find it compelling and believe it would contribute significantly to the company business, they may agree to fund the initiative and appoint you to lead it. One of the customer support engineers on my team came up with an idea to increase customer experience by reducing the time required to set up a networking system. Kent discussed it with me and I set up a meeting for him to pitch the plan to our Senior VP. The pitch went well and Kent got the approval and funding to implement a pilot plan. After the plan was proven to be successful, he was put in charge to implement the plan throughout the company.

- **Public recognition and reward.** Most companies on a regular basis choose employees to recognize for their outstanding work, such as excellent customer service, going above and beyond, innovations, teamwork, etc. Employees are nominated by their peers or their managers. This is an effective and public way to receive recognition and a potent way to promote yourself by letting others promote you. When you have one-on-one meetings with your manager, find out what you can do to be considered for this kind of recognition. And if you have done something worthy of the recognition, discuss whether it merits consideration.

Additional Tips

- You may have heard of the saying “an emperor with no clothes,” meaning someone who has style but no substance; someone who talks the talk but doesn’t walk the walk. It’s important and only meaningful if you have tangible, positive work results to show. Otherwise, you come across as an empty suit. I admit, I had seen people who got by with self-promoting without having meaningful

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accomplishments because they were excellent talkers who could get away with their smooth talking. However, this tends to catch up to them eventually when they are exposed for who they really are.

- Don’t take credit for other people’s work. There is no faster way to lose credibility and people’s trust. A person may get away with it once, but good luck getting other people to work or collaborate with in the future. It’s reasonable and legitimate to get credit as part of the team. If you’re the team leader, a good way to earn credibility and respect with your team is to give credit for the entire team and then recognize key team members for their unique contributions.
- As part of a team, learn to say “we” instead of “I” as much as appropriate. Say: “We got creative and found ways to finish our project ahead of schedule” instead of “I was the one with the creative idea...” I learned this lesson early on in my career when in one presentation to update the executive staff on a team project, I apparently used “I” too many times without realizing it. A manager from another department approached me after the meeting and told me that it was a team effort and I should try to remember to say “we” and give the team credit as appropriate in the future. I realized I was being selfish without doing it intentionally. I apologized to him and explained that it was not my intention and I would learn from it going forward.