

Steps to Improve On-the-Job Recognition

And what to ask before accepting a new position

BY TAUNEE BESSON

Editor's Note: This month columnist Taunee Besson answers questions about common job hunting and career problems. If you have a question about your job search or career, send it to our monthly advice column, National Business Employment Weekly, Box 300, Princeton, N.J. 08543-0300. All names are kept confidential.

Q: In my current position I've worked hard but haven't achieved the promotions and recognition I deserve. Although I get consistently good reviews, my manager doesn't think of me when he assigns special projects or recommends people for advancement or management training. While I enjoy my job and the camaraderie with co-workers, I'm beginning to resent being passed over.

Can this situation be salvaged, or do I need to find another company and start fresh? Obviously, staying put would be easier, but I'm willing to make a move if necessary.

A: It's likely that you can change your situation by improving how you communicate with your

Don't assume that through some mystical force, your manager recognizes your goals

manager. This will take time and effort, but if you like your company it's worth it. Because you didn't specifically mention requesting more responsibility, I'm going to assume that like many competent people, you do a good job, but neglect to ask for what you want. You may be keeping silent on this issue because:

- You're afraid to discuss it.
- You don't know what you want.
- You're assuming that through some mystical force, your manager recognizes your goals and doesn't need any prompting from you.

Any of the above will thwart your ambition if you don't take action to change your behavior. To get your career back on track, try the following process:

- Visualize what you want in the next one to

Ms. Besson is president of Career Dimensions, a Dallas-based firm specializing in career development and job search programs for professionals and corporations.

three years. Identify both your best skills and those you want to improve. Think about ways to use those skills, either through a special project or via a lateral move to another department.

- Next, schedule an appointment with your manager to discuss your career. While it requires putting your ego on the line, find out if he thinks you have the potential to move beyond your current position. If he doesn't, you can either decide to accept his opinion, ask for a transfer or start looking for a new job.

Probably, he recognizes your talent but hasn't made a major effort to develop it. He may think you're happy where you are or he may pay more attention to the needs of other, more assertive employees. "The squeaky wheel gets the grease" has become a cliché for good reason. Those employees who volunteer for skill-building assignments usually are a lot more likely to get them than those who wait and hope to be asked.

- Talk with your boss about the skills you want to use and build. Solicit his opinion on your strong points and those that need work if you are to advance. Be sure to make it clear that you want honest feedback. It's important to clarify his perception of your current performance so you can measure your progress. Without an initial bench mark, it's difficult to take credit for forward movement.

- Finally, set some specific goals and action plans that you and your supervisor believe will foster and document growth. These should be set within a time frame and conform to the RUMBA criteria (reasonable, understandable, measurable, behavior and agreed upon). You also should plan to get together regularly, once every one to three months, to monitor your progress. Remember, now that you have captured his attention and commitment, you must periodically rekindle his interest. One serious discussion won't revolutionize your communication pattern.

This process should work for you if you persist in using it for a year or so. However, if you find that no amount of targeted effort seems to increase your status, consider changing jobs. While your plan may not have worked in your current company, you will have gained some valuable experience in asking for what you want and increasing your expertise, both of which will be useful anywhere you go.

Q: I'm just beginning a job search for a new position where I'll be happier. While my current compensation is adequate, my responsibilities and the opportunities for advancement at my present company aren't what I want.

When interviewing for this job, I concentrated my efforts on answering the employer's questions, saying what I thought he wanted to hear. Obviously, I succeeded. However, shortly after accepting the position, I realized that I'd made a lot of erroneous assumptions about what the job had to offer me. I expected more decision-making latitude, a more flexible boss and a lot more room to grow.

Now that I'm looking around again I want to cover all of the right bases in my interviews and be sure to take a position that will be mutually beneficial. Can you give me some suggestions on how to focus my interviews on what both the company and I want?

A: Finding the right job takes preparation, compatible skills and the right attitude. Most people

Never take a job without interviewing your immediate supervisor

assume that telling the employer what he wants to hear is the best approach to getting the position they want. While this may get them hired, it often leads to disappointment for both parties in the long run. If you convince a potential employer that you are just what he is looking for by masking the real you, it doesn't take long for the discrepancies to start causing problems. For instance, if you have passed yourself off as someone content with following instructions while you really prefer devising your own methods, you start your new job at a major disadvantage.

To be fair to yourself and your interviewer, present your skills, preferences and expectations as candidly as possible. Then you can be sure that your manager wants to hire you, not someone you've pretended to be.

You haven't indicated how long you've had your current job, but it's probably been a relatively short time. You're disillusioned because the job isn't what you expected. If you've been showing your true colors lately, chances are good that your boss is a little disappointed, too. Your leaving will undoubtedly be disruptive for both of you: You must endure the anxiety of another job search. He must spend several weeks looking for a replacement who will then take months to reach your level of expertise. Therefore, it's to your benefit to take a "What you

Continued on Next Page

Your turn to ask

Cont. from Preceding Page

see is what you get" approach in future interviews. If you do, there's a much greater likelihood that you will stay with the company as a happy, productive employee.

Along with giving realistic answers, be sure to ask intelligent questions. Often well-chosen inquiries will sell you more effectively than good answers. Your questions serve several important functions:

- They show your grasp of the situation.
- They give you critical information for making a reasoned decision.
- They offer you interesting insights into the skills, attitudes and management style of your potential boss. (Never take a job without interviewing your immediate supervisor.)

Capable managers enjoy talking to applicants with good questions. It gives them, the opportunity to reveal their expertise and savvy. They also see that you understand the implications of the job and corporate culture sufficiently to explore them more deeply. Smart employers want employees who know the ropes. Only those supervisors who are insecure and unknowledgeable will be intimidated by your questions. Frankly, you'd be making a mistake taking a job that reports to someone like that.

Because you believe you made a poor decision on your current job's responsibilities, management and advancement potential, be sure to ask questions such as the following as you look for a new position:

- Please describe this position.
- Do you envision this job growing in the next three years?
- How would you describe your management style?
- If you and I favored differing approaches to a particular project, how would we resolve this?
- Describe the ideal working relationship between management and employees.
- If I perform well in this position, what career paths would be available for me?
- What types of training does the company make available to increase the expertise of its employees?

Remember the job interview is a mutual exchange of information. Both you and your potential employer must feel confident there's a good match before you combine your talents and resources. ●