

FORTUNE
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**WOULD BEING A BIGGER S.O.B
HELP ME GET THAT PROMOTION?**
ANNE FISCHER IS ASK ANNIE

Dear Annie: I was under consideration for a big promotion, and the man would have been my new boss was enthusiastic about me. But when he put my name forward to the global head, he was told to find someone else I would be “too nice” for the job. I’m bewildered by this, and so far I’ve scheduled two meetings with the global head to try to pin down what he meant, but he’s missed both of them. It’s hard for me to see what kind of future I have here, and although I’d rather not, I’m thinking of looking elsewhere. What should I do? –Valerius

Dear Valerius: “Too nice?” This was certainly a new one to me. (What’s next? “Too honest”? No, that was last year.) It turns out, though, that your dilemma is a fairly common one. “Management, especially senior management, is a constant balancing act between being ‘nice’ – that is, compassionate, considerate, and so on –and being tough, as in making hard decisions and standing up for unpopular ideas,” says Nancy Friedberg, president of New York City-based executive coaching firm Career Leverage. “In a leadership job, which is sounds as if your promotion would have been, it’s more important to be respected than it is to be liked. By saying you’re ‘too nice’, the global head may mean he thinks you’re too worried about whether people like you. He’s saying you’re perceived as a pushover.”

So what can you do about it? Take meanie lessons from Al “Chainsaw” Dunlap? Well, no. First, she says, you need to look back over your performance for the past couple of years and try to analyze your own behavior as others might have seen it. Was there a situation, like a contract negotiation, in which you weren’t assertive enough to come out on top? How much influence do you have among your peers? Can you persuade people to get behind your ideas? If you’ve done formal evaluations of subordinates, were you too kind to be frank with them about their shortcomings? Do you have trouble pushing back or saying no? Do you usually back down right away if someone disagrees with you? Any or all of these kinds of things may have given the global honcho the idea that you’re milquetoast. If you’re not sure, and since the global head isn’t talking, ask a few colleagues you trust and respect for their observations-“or even”, Friedberg says, “ask one of the global head’s peers for some feedback, if you have a good relationship with any of them.”

Once you’ve pinpointed the problem, she suggests, “seek out opportunities to show you can be firm. If you can’t get those opportunities in your current position, try making a lateral move into a job where you can – and let the global head know it. Write him a memo. He needs to see you as proactive and aggressive, with a definite plan of attack. It shows you’re willing to take the bull by the horns.” Friedberg believes, by the way, the Big Guy actually did you a favor by saying you need to grow a backbone. “This kind of constructive criticism is a gift,” she says. “You’ll never move up unless you can act on it.” Leaving the company wouldn’t help, she adds. If you’re too easy going and softhearted for senior management at this outfit, you probably would be elsewhere as well – except that, there, they might be too nice to tell you.