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CHANGE @ WORK: MAKING THE RIGHT MOVES for a MOVE UP

By Patricia Kitchen

Does your employer have a formal system for determining who moves up its managerial and executive ranks? If it does, it may also be a bloody miracle if you know much about it, since the details of such processes are about as classified as the date we may invade Iraq.

Certainly some employers don't have a system—that's called succession by whim. As the retiring executive is cleaning out his or her office, a quick meeting is held and the powers-that-be draw up a short list of favorites. Besides, formal plan or no, there is always the "boss' nephew" factor.

With that noted, about two of three human-resource executives said in a recent 210-person survey that the importance of succession plans at their companies is on the upswing. Yet, just a little more than one-third say they actually tell people they've dubbed high-level promotion material. And their selection criteria? Only 17 percent make that public.

"Historically, this has been a tightly held process," says Tom McKinnon, executive consultant with Boston-based J. Howard & Associates, the diversity and human resources consulting firm that conducted the survey. Why? Mainly to keep from making an "implied promise" that may or may not be kept. Also to keep morale from plummeting among those not so knighted.

Still, as we know, there are ways to gather information in any company - what else is a grapevine for?

But first, let's just get to know some terminology—because one of the key requirements for managerial advancement is a strong stomach for leadership lingo. A succession plan at most companies, McKinnon says, identifies potential replacements for "the people who will replace the CEO." The plan identifies those executives seen as ready in one to three years or ready in three to five years.

A little way down the food chain, we find "high potential" programs that identify talented managers and in some cases provide them with further developmental opportunities, such as mentors, training and key assignments.

Now, how do you find out about such hush-hush initiatives? Get friendly with your human-resources people, especially those who toss around terms like "bench strength," "talent management" and "leadership development." Human-resources people may be pooh-poohed, says Nancy Friedberg, an executive coach at Career Leverage in Manhattan, because the business managers get the final say on who makes the list. But "everybody's thumbs-up helps." Plus, human-resource types are the ones who develop and manage the succession process and may give you the inside scoop on company criteria.

Friedberg says three key qualities are looked for in “high-potentials” (besides job mastery, which is a given). Bosses want you to: 1) articulate strategy and vision; 2) relate well to others; and 3) display executive presence, which means how well you fit into that inner circle.

Another term to listen for: competencies. Try to find out what they are at your company because you’ve got to have them to get ahead, says McKinnon. Some common ones he mentions, apart from those Friedberg just described: “Exercises sound judgment, leverages market opportunities, develops talent, instills trust, drives for results, fosters teamwork, demonstrates a global mindset.” (Shall we add: sniffs out well-guarded company information?)

Armed with a sense of how decisions get made, you can start strategizing about how to make yourself an attractive candidate. Experts say you can approach a boss or other well-placed individual and express interest in moving up the ranks, asking for their guidance. Take care, though, says McKinnon, not to come across as too threatening, as in: And when will you be leaving your job?

Of course, this strategizing is exactly what Friedberg, who used to run fast-track advancement programs for companies, helps her clients do. Her first step is to help them draw an “influence map” of their peers and boss’ peers-choosing, of course, those who seem to have the most clout. They then develop a plan to make the client more visible with these key people.

One of the best ways to heighten visibility is to take on risky assignments-and make them succeed, she says. She points to such jobs as leading a start-up unit, going into a new territory or taking on a lackluster project in need or turnaround.

Getting promoted these days can be a challenge. McKinnon says there are plenty of baby boomers itching to take early retirement who are staying put because of the sorry state of their 401(k)s-with little hope in sight. Plus, a decade or re-engineering has simply eliminated lots of managerial positions to which you might have moved.

So, with that in mind, Friedberg advises you to learn to manage your feelings of frustration-this is called developing emotional intelligence. She also points out that a chip on your shoulder goes a long way to “mess up that executive presence.”