

Getting Ahead



You may need to blow your own horn to get that next project or promotion.

BY ELIZABETH BLACK

Do you find yourself being passed over for promotions at work? Have you ever wondered why the person chosen for a special project was selected instead of you? Many people in today's workforce find themselves in this position repeatedly. They wonder what to do about it. Sometimes they complain to a co-worker or talk to their spouse, but, over time, they just chalk it up to someone being better than they are or in the "inner circle."

Is this truly what is happening? It may be that there are other forces at work here— forces under the control of anyone who wants to get ahead in business.

Why Not Me?

When Wendi, an administrative professional at a large financial institution on the west coast, learned that her best

friend had been promoted to a team leader of a high-visibility project in the HR Department, Wendi decided that she would try to understand better why she wasn't chosen for this role. She asked to meet with the HR sponsor of the project who was surprised to learn of Wendi's interest. She told Wendi, "Our perception of you, Wendi, is that you are a dedicated employee, but other than that, we don't know much about you. However, we always need strong team leaders, so here's some advice if you want to be considered for the next opportunity."

Take A Personal Inventory

To begin with, Wendi was advised to inventory her skills and experiences. Too often, weeks, months and years pass, and we keep doing our work, never stepping back to think about or to document the new skills we are learning or the experiences, which demonstrate our capabilities. When Wendi thought about it, she realized that she had taken several online courses on spreadsheet analysis, graphic design and time management. Additionally, she had worked closely with the accounts payable administrator when her supervisor needed to prepare a presentation for the annual meeting. Wendi's new skills in Excel, FrontPage and Visio are highly valued skills, but no one, including Wendi, had ever added these skills to her resume in the internal database, nor had she updated her resume to include these new skills.

Wendi was advised to document her skills and also to think about her career desires— what did she think she would enjoy doing? This was the interesting part to Wendi. When she thought about it, she could easily see how assisting with the presentation for the annual meeting could lead to more presentation preparation work. She could see herself getting even more proficient in FrontPage as she created more presentations. Additionally, Wendi decided that she really liked working with the financial information. Perhaps she would like to play a role that worked with financial analysis more than

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she does in her current role.

As Wendi began to take her personal inventory, she was becoming clearer on what she had accomplished and in what direction she might like to go. She also found that documenting her inventory helped her think about her work assignments in new ways, and she began to feel that she had really accomplished much more than she ever thought.

Here is Wendi's personal inventory:

Projects/Training I Have Done

- Advanced Spreadsheet Analysis
- FrontPage training

Skills I Learned/Demonstrated

- Trend Analysis
- Metrics dashboard
- Graphic design

Career Desires/What Would I Like To Do?

- Presentation support using graphics
- Graphic design work

Wendi knew, though, that simply updating her resumé or skill inventory in the company database or in her professional resumé wouldn't be enough to open up new opportunities. Others had to know, too, so Wendi asked for another meeting with the HR person who offered to help her.

Make Your Successes Visible

Wendi's second meeting with her HR colleague was as helpful as the first. This time they focused upon who knows Wendi and what she has done. She asked Wendi to think about a time when Wendi had accomplished something significant and was not acknowledged for the work. It didn't take long for Wendi to recall the presentation she helped with for the annual meeting. While the accounts payable administrator had been very complimentary to Wendi when the presentation turned out so well, other than the e-mail of thanks the AP administrator sent to Wendi, no one else knew Wendi's contribution to this presenta-

tion. It wasn't that the AP administrator was withholding the credit or deliberately not showcasing Wendi's work. She simply didn't give it a thought. Her goal was to finish the presentation for her supervisor, and, after all, she did send Wendi an e-mail expressing her thanks.

Wendi admitted that she felt let down when she saw her AP colleague getting public thanks for the presentation, but she said, "What was I supposed to do—stand up and say I had done the analysis and the graphic design for the presentation?" Of course, that wouldn't be the appropriate response, and Wendi never really thought about this course of action, but she was frustrated that no one really acknowledged her contributions.

company newsletter indicating her role in this important project! However, she did suggest to Wendi that it would be appropriate for Wendi to forward the thank you e-mail to her supervisor, indicating what she had been asked to do to support the AP administrator, **specifically and briefly** what she had done. She would be letting her supervisor know that she enjoyed this project and would be happy to get involved in similar projects. She could also indicate that she has been taking additional training online and that her career desires might make her a good candidate for other projects which she may currently not know about.

In hindsight, Wendi might also have acknowledged the thank you e-mail from



“How do you expect anyone to know what you have done if you don't tell them, was the question her HR colleague asked. She acknowledged that Wendi could **not** post a note on the department bulletin board or take out an ad in the

the AP supervisor by sending a return e-mail asking the AP supervisor to tell anyone else who may be looking for presentation support that Wendi would be a good person to reach out to. Wendi's HR colleague, whom she is now coming to

regard as an informal mentor, explained that this was sort of like getting a testimonial about your work from someone with whom you worked and who can speak about the quality of your work or your work habits. If she had truly done a good job, the recommendation should be easy to provide.

an important project he was about to launch. Once Wendi and her supervisor worked out the details on how others on the team might be able to cover some of Wendi's existing work, and they worked out how Wendi could approach the new project, Wendi's supervisor went on to engage her in a career development con-

some of my current responsibilities and do my best with my new projects— oh, and be certain to let others know as I achieve success.”

A Word About “Blowing Your Own Horn”

As Wendi learned, people are often passed over for projects and even promotions because the right people do not know their skills, desires and demonstrated successes. Many people, though, are shy of broadcasting what they can do or have done— blowing their own horn.

They believe that if they do a good job, people will notice. If people notice, they will be asked to take on additional responsibilities, and, somehow, managers with job openings or new roles will find them. With the amount of work and the time pressures on everyone in the business world today, this is a bit like leaving your career up to chance.

Letting others know about what you can and want to do, if done right, is really personal marketing. Just as you wouldn't try a new product without hearing something about it or knowing some specifics about it, you wouldn't ask someone to work on a project or take a new role, without some information. If you truly have skills that you wish to use and you take care not to broadcast with arrogance, you will have learned the art of “blowing your own horn” and you may just get ahead— projects can lead to promotions— if only people know about you.

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versation— something they had never done before. She told Wendi that she had no idea that Wendi was looking to do financial analysis or other projects and that she was very glad to know this since Wendi was a valuable employee and they didn't want to lose her to another company. She acknowledged that the company's internal job posting system wasn't as robust as it should be. However, she also let Wendi know that Wendi also needed to talk about her career interests to those who could help her. As the meeting ended, the supervisor told Wendi, “If you don't let your supervisor and others know that you are interested in other tasks and projects, how will we know?”

“She's right,” Wendi mused. “Now I just have to figure out how to transfer

Make Your Desires Known

A few weeks later, Wendi was surprised to see an e-mail from her supervisor inviting her to a career discussion meeting. At first, Wendi thought that she had been too active in looking for additional projects. She feared that her supervisor would think she was letting her current responsibilities falter while she was spending time looking for other projects. After the first ten minutes of their meeting, though, Wendi's fears were put aside. Her supervisor told Wendi that she had heard from another Departmental Manager that Wendi had skills in creating excellent presentations and that making financial presentations understandable was a real art. He asked Wendi's supervisor if Wendi had time to take on

