Max Paradox

PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

A tongue-in-cheek guide series ;)

Everyone Wants a Promotion, but I Have Only One Chair

How to Discuss Career Development, Expectations, and Personnel Decisions Fairly, Even When You Can't Say "Yes" to Everyone



We've got a problem. But relax. It can be solved—and we'll even have something to laugh about.

Everyone Wants a Promotion, but I Have Only One Chair

How to Discuss Career Development, Expectations, and Personnel Decisions Fairly, Even When You Can't Say "Yes" to Everyone

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INTRO

The trouble begins with a chair that nobody has actually sat in yet. Your company has announced a new team leader position, and suddenly the atmosphere in the office has changed. People who previously regarded the weekly management meeting as an excellent opportunity to catch up on unanswered emails are now volunteering to attend. Employees who rarely discussed their achievements have developed a remarkable talent for mentioning them within thirty seconds of entering a room. Someone has even started saying things like "From a leadership perspective" during conversations about the office printer. You know what's happening. There is one promotion available, several ambitious people want it, and you have somehow become the person expected to make everyone feel good about a decision that will disappoint most of them.

Welcome to one of management's least advertised responsibilities: dealing with career ambitions when the supply of opportunities is considerably smaller than the demand. Nobody warned you that managing people would occasionally resemble organizing a competition where all the contestants are your colleagues, the prize is a new job title, and everyone must continue working together after the winner is announced. You cannot manufacture extra positions, ignore the budget, or promote everyone simply because they've worked hard. Yet you are expected to keep people motivated, preserve trust, recognize achievements, and explain decisions without making the unsuccessful candidates feel as though their careers have been placed in permanent storage.

What makes the situation especially difficult is that a promotion rarely means just one thing. For some employees, it represents recognition after years of dependable work. For others, it means financial security, professional status, greater independence, or proof that their ambitions are being taken seriously. One person wants to manage a team. Another wants the salary associated with management but would rather undergo an emergency dental procedure than spend Monday mornings discussing performance problems. A third is tired of watching less experienced colleagues receive opportunities and wants reassurance that their own future hasn't quietly disappeared from the company's plans. All three might say exactly the same thing: "I want a promotion." If you assume they mean the same thing, you may spend months solving the wrong problem.

The difficulty is that organizations have legitimate limitations, while employees have legitimate expectations. Both can be true simultaneously. A talented employee may genuinely deserve better recognition even when no suitable higher-level position exists. A company may have a compelling business reason to promote one candidate without implying that everyone else is inadequate. And a manager may sincerely want to support someone's career while lacking the authority to approve a salary increase or create a role. The tension becomes damaging when these differences are concealed behind cheerful corporate language. "We're exploring exciting opportunities" sounds encouraging, but it becomes considerably less exciting when the opportunities have never been budgeted, discussed, or approved.

Managers often respond to these situations with kindness that accidentally creates more trouble. They tell promising

employees that their time will come, describe them as future leaders, or encourage them to keep going because something might open up soon. None of this necessarily involves deliberate dishonesty. Perhaps you really do believe someone has excellent prospects. Perhaps you are trying to prevent disappointment during a difficult conversation. But employees may interpret your optimism as a commitment, especially when you appear to have access to information they don't. Six months later, you're surprised that they expected a promotion. They're surprised that you didn't realize you had promised one. Everybody feels betrayed, although nobody remembers agreeing to exactly the same thing.

The opposite approach is hardly better. Some managers become so worried about creating expectations that they refuse to discuss career opportunities at all. Every question receives a cautious response about business needs, organizational priorities, and decisions being subject to approval. Eventually, employees stop asking. The manager celebrates the apparent disappearance of difficult conversations, unaware that the conversations have simply moved elsewhere. Perhaps to a recruiter. Perhaps to another employer. Silence can feel wonderfully efficient right up until a resignation letter arrives. Avoiding promises is sensible; avoiding meaningful discussion is not. People need reliable information about their prospects, even when that information contains uncertainty.

This book is about finding a more responsible way to handle that uncertainty. You'll learn how to understand what employees actually want, distinguish strong performance from readiness for different responsibilities, and make personnel decisions that can withstand reasonable

questions. You'll explore how to discuss limitations without hiding behind senior management, how to explain disappointing outcomes without inventing comforting stories, and how to recognize when an apparently generous development opportunity is really just additional work in more attractive packaging. There will also be situations where the problem isn't the employee's expectations but the organization's behavior, the manager's judgment, or a selection process that seems suspiciously designed to produce a particular winner.

Fairness deserves particular attention because it is one of those words everybody supports until it affects their preferred outcome. Giving everyone the same result isn't necessarily fair. Neither is rewarding whoever complains the loudest, stays latest, or enjoys the most convenient relationship with senior leadership. Fairness requires relevant criteria, consistent treatment, an honest assessment of circumstances, and appropriate opportunities to question important mistakes. It also requires judgment. No spreadsheet can completely remove uncertainty from a decision involving human beings. You can calculate scores, compare experience, and document evidence, but someone still has to take responsibility for the conclusion. Unfortunately, the spreadsheet will not attend the difficult conversations on your behalf, even if you add an impressive dashboard.

There are practical limits to what any manager can accomplish. You may work in a company where promotions are approved only during specific review periods. Perhaps salaries are determined centrally, the organizational structure is frozen, or senior executives disagree about what a particular position should involve. You may inherit

expectations created by a previous manager or discover that someone has been performing higher-level duties for years without receiving a formal change. These circumstances cannot always be repaired through improved communication. Sometimes they require resources, policy changes, specialist advice, or decisions beyond your authority. Your responsibility is to understand those boundaries, communicate them accurately, and use the influence you genuinely possess rather than pretending either that you control everything or that you control nothing.

Nor should you expect every difficult conversation to end with gratitude. An employee may be angry after losing a promotion, challenge your assessment, or decide that another employer offers a better future. Those reactions don't automatically prove that you handled the situation badly. People have the right to disagree with decisions affecting their careers, and disappointment is not a malfunction that management must immediately repair. You can listen carefully, explain your reasoning, acknowledge uncertainty, and treat someone respectfully without guaranteeing their satisfaction. In serious matters involving unequal treatment, confidentiality, or employment rights, proper organizational procedures and qualified advice may also be necessary. Good intentions are valuable, but they don't replace responsible practice.

There's another reason this subject matters: the consequences extend beyond the person who receives the promotion. Everyone else is watching. They notice whether the criteria made sense, whether previous commitments were respected, and whether the successful candidate was properly supported. They also notice when a valuable colleague becomes trapped in their current role because

they're supposedly too important to replace. Decisions about advancement teach employees what the organization actually values, often more convincingly than any leadership presentation. When the process is credible, people may disagree with an outcome without concluding that the entire system is meaningless. When it isn't, even a defensible decision can leave behind suspicion that lasts long after the announcement.

You don't need to become a flawless judge of human potential. You need a better set of questions, clearer distinctions, and the willingness to have conversations that don't come with guaranteed happy endings. Your goal is not to make every ambitious employee a manager, every disappointment disappear, or every leadership decision universally popular. It is to make professional growth understandable, expectations realistic, and important choices more defensible. You may still have only one chair. That limitation is real. But you can stop treating the people who don't receive it as unsuccessful contestants who must somehow be persuaded to applaud enthusiastically before returning to their desks. Their careers remain important, too.

Chapter 1 - A Promotion Is a New Job, Not a Lifetime Achievement Award

At 3:42 on a Thursday afternoon, the head of customer operations receives an email with the subject line "Promotion Recommendation - Urgent." The message concerns Daniel, an account specialist who has exceeded his targets for three consecutive years, rescued several difficult client relationships, and become the person everybody calls when something expensive goes wrong. His manager recommends promoting him to regional team leader. The justification is enthusiastic: Daniel works exceptionally hard, understands the business, and deserves recognition. There is only one detail missing. Nobody has explained why Daniel would be particularly good at leading a team. Apparently, the ability to calm an angry customer has been accepted as sufficient evidence that he can manage six colleagues, resolve performance disputes, and explain budget reductions without developing a mysterious eye twitch.

This is where many promotion decisions begin to go wrong. An employee performs brilliantly, and the organization feels compelled to reward that performance with a higher position. The intention is understandable. People who contribute significantly should see that their work matters. But rewarding past achievement and selecting someone for future responsibilities are different decisions, even when they happen at the same time. One concerns what somebody has already delivered. The other concerns what they are reasonably prepared to do next. Confusing the two can leave the company with a vacancy in the very position where the employee excelled and a newly promoted

person struggling with responsibilities they never particularly wanted.

The distinction sounds obvious until you face somebody who has genuinely earned your admiration. You know the hours they've invested, the problems they've solved, and the occasions when they stepped forward while everyone else suddenly became fascinated by their calendars. Saying they deserve recognition feels entirely appropriate. Saying they might not be ready for a particular promotion feels almost disloyal. Managers sometimes resolve this discomfort by treating career advancement as a delayed payment for good behavior. Work hard enough, stay long enough, deliver enough impressive results, and eventually management must hand you a bigger title. Unfortunately, organizational roles are not loyalty cards. Completing ten successful projects does not automatically entitle you to one complimentary department.

Consider Daniel's situation more carefully. In his present role, he manages a portfolio of important clients, solves complicated service problems, and negotiates practical solutions. Much of his success comes from his personal expertise and willingness to take responsibility. The proposed leadership role would require him to distribute workloads, coach less experienced employees, make decisions affecting several accounts, and address colleagues whose performance has deteriorated. He would spend less time personally solving customers' problems and more time ensuring that other people can solve them. His success would increasingly depend on their performance rather than his own. These responsibilities overlap with his existing experience, but they are not interchangeable. Being

the best person at completing a task does not necessarily mean being the best person at helping others complete it.

The question becomes even more interesting when Daniel says he wants the promotion. What exactly does he understand about the job? Perhaps he imagines greater influence over customer decisions, an improved salary, and the freedom to make changes without requesting approval. Those may be legitimate benefits of the role. But has he considered performance management, staffing constraints, recruitment, uncomfortable conversations, or the possibility of being held responsible when a colleague misses a target? A manager doesn't need to frighten employees with an exaggerated portrait of leadership misery. There is no reason to describe the position as an endless procession of unpleasant meetings interrupted occasionally by lunch. You do, however, owe candidates a realistic picture of what the work involves.

A useful starting point is to examine the actual job before discussing who should receive it. What decisions will the person make? Which results will they own? Where does their authority begin and end? What situations are likely to consume their time during the first six months? A role description filled with phrases such as "driving excellence" and "demonstrating strategic leadership" might look impressive, but it doesn't tell a candidate what Tuesday afternoon will feel like. A clearer description might explain that the person must manage competing customer priorities, coach five employees, approve defined operational decisions, and escalate specific financial risks. That description gives you something meaningful against which to assess readiness.

It also prevents another common mistake: promoting somebody because you like the way they work rather than because their abilities match the new responsibilities. Every manager has preferences. Perhaps you admire people who respond quickly, speak confidently, or rarely question instructions. Someone who shares your working style may feel naturally suitable for greater responsibility. Yet a leadership position might demand patient listening, independent disagreement, and the ability to slow down before making a consequential decision. A quiet employee who asks thoughtful questions may be better prepared than the energetic colleague who provides an answer before hearing the entire problem. Confidence is visible. Judgment sometimes requires considerably more attention to recognize.

None of this means a candidate must already perform every aspect of the higher role flawlessly. If that were the requirement, nobody could advance without first doing the new job unofficially, possibly for years. Readiness involves having an adequate foundation, demonstrating relevant abilities, and being capable of developing remaining skills with realistic support. The necessary level depends on the consequences of mistakes and the help the organization can offer. A new supervisor joining an experienced management team may have room to learn certain procedures. Someone immediately assuming sole responsibility for a high-risk operation may need stronger evidence of particular competencies before taking charge. Expectations should reflect genuine responsibilities rather than an imaginary employee who has never made a mistake.

Now imagine a second candidate, Priya, whose individual performance is consistently good but less spectacular than

Daniel's. She has coordinated cross-functional work, supported new colleagues, and handled disagreements between team members without escalating every conversation. She occasionally needs help with complex client negotiations, but she's demonstrated an ability to organize other people's efforts and consider the wider consequences of decisions. Choosing Priya might seem controversial if Daniel has the strongest individual results. Yet if the leadership role primarily requires enabling other people to succeed, her experience could be more relevant. You would still need to assess both candidates carefully. The important point is that the person with the most impressive present-day scorecard isn't automatically the best fit for a fundamentally different job.

This distinction becomes harder when organizations have limited ways to reward exceptional specialists. Suppose Daniel's salary has barely changed despite the growing complexity of his accounts. He now handles difficult commercial negotiations and provides technical guidance to the whole department. If the only meaningful salary increase comes with a management title, he has a strong incentive to pursue management regardless of his interests. The organization has created a choice between remaining under-recognized and entering a career path he may not enjoy. A better compensation or specialist progression structure may help, where such options exist. When they don't, managers should acknowledge the limitation rather than manufacture evidence that the employee is destined to supervise people.

Length of service can complicate the decision just as much as performance. An employee who has contributed faithfully for twelve years may understandably expect advancement. Their knowledge, reliability, and commitment

deserve serious consideration. Yet tenure alone does not establish readiness for every available role. Nor should a shorter-serving employee automatically be dismissed as insufficiently loyal. Experience matters when it has produced relevant capability, perspective, and judgment. A person can spend years developing extraordinary expertise, but it is equally possible to repeat a familiar routine without acquiring the competencies required elsewhere. Neither possibility can be determined by reading the employment start date and nodding thoughtfully.

There is also a danger in using promotions to solve temporary retention problems. A valued employee announces that a competitor has offered a better position. Suddenly, the company discovers an urgent need for a leadership role that nobody had mentioned in the previous budget discussions. Sometimes the employee really is suitable and the organization has overlooked a legitimate need. Other times, the new position exists mainly because management is frightened of losing someone. Before approving it, ask whether the responsibilities would still justify the role if the employee had never received another offer. If the answer is no, the promotion may merely exchange an immediate staffing problem for a longer-term structural one.

Recognition should be more deliberate than this. If someone has delivered outstanding results, acknowledge the specific contribution. Explain what changed because of their work, ensure their achievements are represented accurately, and examine whatever reward mechanisms are genuinely available. A salary adjustment, meaningful bonus, expanded expert responsibility, or increased autonomy may sometimes be more appropriate than a hierarchical

promotion. These alternatives aren't automatically equivalent, and they shouldn't be presented as consolation prizes. Their value depends on the employee's actual circumstances and the organization's ability to deliver them. Telling somebody they're indispensable while offering absolutely nothing tangible can eventually make the compliment sound like a warning about their future workload.

One practical difficulty deserves particular attention: a candidate may never have had an opportunity to demonstrate the skills required by the proposed role. You might conclude that someone lacks experience coordinating colleagues, even though you've consistently assigned those opportunities to somebody else. Absence of evidence isn't always evidence of inability. Before rejecting a candidate on that basis, consider whether relevant experience could reasonably have been acquired within their current responsibilities. Where appropriate, a limited assignment, properly supported project, or structured assessment can reveal abilities that routine work hasn't exposed. The purpose should be to obtain useful information, not to demand that every interested employee perform an unpaid audition for several months.

Good judgment also requires examining the evidence rather than collecting flattering adjectives. Saying Daniel is "a natural leader" explains very little. What has he done that suggests he can support other people's performance? How did he respond when colleagues disagreed with his recommendation? Did he help someone develop a skill, or did he repeatedly take over because completing the work himself was faster? The latter might have been entirely appropriate during an urgent customer incident, but it tells

you something different from patient coaching. Observations should be interpreted in context. A single impressive presentation or difficult interaction should rarely define an entire promotion decision.

A straightforward assessment can separate demonstrated strengths, relevant gaps, and the support that would realistically be available after promotion. Suppose Daniel has strong business judgment and outstanding customer expertise, but limited experience resolving internal conflict. If he has shown openness to feedback and would receive coaching from an experienced manager, that gap might be manageable. If the new position requires immediate responsibility for a severely divided team without any available support, the same gap carries greater weight. Candidate suitability is partly about the environment into which you're placing someone. Declaring a person ready without considering that environment can be as misleading as declaring them incapable without giving them a reasonable opportunity to learn.

It is equally important to avoid turning the assessment into a referendum on someone's worth. An employee who isn't selected may hear the decision as proof that their years of work have been dismissed. Managers sometimes make that worse by suddenly discovering numerous shortcomings during the promotion discussion, despite previously praising the employee's performance. You should be able to say, with accuracy, that a person performs their current role exceptionally well while explaining why specific responsibilities in another role require further consideration. If the central obstacle is an unavailable position rather than a competence gap, acknowledge that distinction. Employees

deserve an accurate explanation, not an invented weakness designed to make the decision easier to defend.

The final choice will still involve uncertainty. People grow, organizational needs change, and even well-supported predictions about future performance can be wrong. Your responsibility is to make a reasoned decision based on relevant evidence, apply appropriate standards, and provide the support necessary after someone takes on new responsibilities. You don't need to pretend that selecting a candidate was mathematically inevitable. You should be able to explain why the person's capabilities match the work and why any remaining risks are acceptable. That is considerably more credible than insisting that the winner was simply the most deserving human being in the department.

Daniel may eventually become an excellent team leader. He might also discover that he would rather develop as a senior account expert, where his strongest abilities can create substantial value. Priya may prove particularly suited to management, or she may encounter challenges that weren't apparent during selection. None of these outcomes can be settled by enthusiasm alone. What matters is refusing to confuse gratitude for past contributions with evidence about future responsibilities. A promotion is an opportunity to undertake different work, not an engraved trophy for surviving a sufficient number of annual performance reviews. Celebrate achievement generously, assess readiness seriously, and give people a truthful account of the job before asking them to build their careers around it.

Chapter 2 - When Someone Says "I Want a Promotion," What Are They Actually Asking For?

"I want to move into a management position." Six perfectly ordinary words, capable of launching six months of completely unnecessary career planning. A manager hears them and immediately starts thinking about leadership training, reporting structures, vacancies, and performance reviews. Human Resources may become involved. A development plan appears. Somebody suggests a mentoring program. By the time the paperwork is complete, everyone is discussing how to prepare the employee for managing people. Nobody has established whether managing people is what the employee actually wants. This is an impressive achievement, considering the entire process began with a conversation supposedly intended to understand their ambitions.

The difficulty is that a promotion is often a proposed solution rather than a clearly defined need. People associate higher positions with a collection of desirable changes: better pay, more authority, increased recognition, challenging work, professional credibility, and greater control over their working lives. They may want several of these things simultaneously. They may also assume a particular promotion is the only available route to obtaining them. Managers can make the same assumption, especially in organizations where career progression has historically meant moving upward through increasingly elaborate job titles. Consequently, both sides begin negotiating the

position before identifying the problem the position is supposed to solve.

Imagine Sophie, an experienced operations analyst working for a company that manages commercial properties. She has repeatedly asked to become an operations manager. Her supervisor believes she's ambitious but not especially interested in people management, so he keeps encouraging her to gain experience supervising colleagues. Sophie attends a workshop, shadows a team leader, and reluctantly agrees to coordinate an onboarding process. During her next development discussion, she is noticeably frustrated. Eventually, after several questions, she explains that she wants a management position because building managers frequently ignore her recommendations unless they're repeated by somebody with a more impressive title. She doesn't particularly want direct reports. She wants the authority to make certain operational decisions and to have her professional judgment taken seriously.

That discovery changes the nature of the conversation. Sophie might still benefit from a formal promotion, but leadership training is no longer the obvious answer. The organization could examine her decision-making authority, the approval process, or the way technical recommendations reach senior stakeholders. Perhaps an appropriately defined senior specialist role would address her needs. Perhaps the current structure genuinely requires management approval for decisions involving significant financial exposure. Both possibilities deserve examination. What clearly doesn't help is spending another six months teaching Sophie how to conduct performance reviews when her actual frustration concerns decisions about building maintenance contracts. She came looking for professional

influence and was offered a certificate in having uncomfortable conversations.

Understanding the need behind a promotion request doesn't mean trying to talk somebody out of wanting advancement. This distinction matters. A manager with no available positions may become suspiciously enthusiastic about exploring alternative meanings of career growth. Suddenly every request for promotion is reinterpreted as a desire for interesting assignments, professional satisfaction, or the privilege of attending additional meetings. Employees notice when questions are designed to understand them and when they're designed to make their original request disappear. If someone genuinely wants managerial responsibility, that ambition deserves a serious discussion. If they want a higher salary, don't automatically substitute a fascinating project. Understanding the goal is useful only when you're willing to acknowledge the answer.

The most effective questions focus on the working life the employee wants to experience. What would they be doing differently if the promotion happened? Which decisions would they be able to make? Which current frustrations would disappear? What responsibilities are they particularly interested in taking on? These questions turn an abstract job title into a description of tangible changes. You might discover that someone wants greater independence but has little appetite for supervising others. Another employee may enjoy mentoring colleagues and coordinating work but have no interest in budget ownership. A third might be attracted to the title primarily because it signals progress in a career that currently feels stationary. Each answer has different implications for what the organization can reasonably offer.