



7 Rules for Rising Stars

April Allen, WittKieffer

All organizations have their “rising stars” or “high potentials” who will one day, hopefully, fill the senior-most roles and shape the organization’s future. This might be you – a rising star in your organization who has ambitions for bigger and better things. You are to be congratulated for this, but remember that there are right ways and wrong ways to rise in your career.

One mistake I see up-and-comers make is to assume that their ascent has to happen quickly and uniformly. It’s fine to be ambitious, but give serious thought to how you want to progress in your career, and be open to the possibility that there are many paths to follow.

On that note, below are rules for rising stars – or those who hope to be – to consider as they ascend in their careers:

1. Be flexible in how you want your career to progress. Gone are the days when “rising” meant moving directly up the ladder. In an era when professionals want to try new roles and responsibilities and move horizontally as well as vertically, there are many options before you. Rethink the traditional career path. Be open to sideways or nonlinear moves if they prepare you for better things in the future.

- 2. Be a high performer in order to be a high potential.** Regardless of how ambitious you are, you must prove yourself in your current job first. Before you set your sights on your next position, make sure to dazzle in your current one. Your exceptional performance is what will get you noticed and help you move up in your field.
- 3. Study what your organization wants in its high potentials.** Most employers are willing to let rising stars mature gradually, in their own way. However, there still are organizations that have an “up or out” culture. If this describes yours, and you want to rise at your own pace, you may wish to move to a new employer whose culture suits your career ambitions. Or maybe the opposite is true, and you need to move to another employer in order to progress at a faster speed that suits you.
- 4. Seek out mentors and sponsors (and know the difference between the two).** Sponsors are those who can help you get promoted and work to elevate your status within an organization. Mentors “act as a mirror, enabling individuals to see themselves more clearly”. (Millennials in particular like to have feedback on how they are doing and talk about themselves and

their careers—not in an egotistical manner, but as a means of figuring out or even course correcting their futures.) Find leaders in your life who can serve as one (sponsor) or the other (mentor) for you as you rise.

- 5. Look for the right opportunities to grow.** It's important to take on new challenges above and beyond your normal responsibilities — new committee work or education/training opportunities, for example, or even an entirely new job. Pick and choose the opportunities that feel right to you. Don't jump at every chance, and don't expect immediate results. Remember that your career growth is more a marathon than a sprint. Take the long view.
- 6. Stick to your values.** Never sacrifice what is truly important for you simply for career progression. For example, know what constitutes work-life balance for you and stick to it. It's possible to get ahead, but still within a 9-to-5 or flex work schedule. If loyalty is important to you, it might mean spending more time with a given job and employer than is typical. You decide what feels right as you move up in your career.
- 7. Be loyal but leave if you must.** Employers understand that not all rising talent will stay. It's not unusual for a professional to have as many as a dozen jobs in their lifetime. As much as you feel loyalty toward your boss and organization, know that you must occasionally move on to rise and grow in your career. If you must leave, do it with respect and without burning bridges with those individuals who have supported your career thus far.

About the Authors

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