

What It Takes to Get Ahead: Performance, Image, Exposure

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Harvey Coleman is a consultant who served the early part of his career in professional roles with IBM. Curious about his progress, he sought what he could do to get ahead. Coleman was surprised by what he learned. He felt a responsibility to share it with others. He started Coleman Management Consultants and wrote *Empowering Yourself: The Organizational Game Revealed*.

Maybe you can't understand why there is so little recognition for your diligent, competent work. Your organization says pay raises and greater responsibility is based on quality performance. Despite persistent effort, you just can't seem to achieve the acknowledgement you desire.

Coleman teaches that there are two sets of rules in any organization. One is officially articulated and shared with everyone. The other set of rules is unwritten and vague. It's not a malicious plot to keep people from getting ahead. Usually the top leaders, who appear to know these unspecified rules intimately, have difficulty describing them even when prompted. **(Added after publication: See my article entitled "Overcoming the Curse of Knowledge," published Sept. 27, 2008. Individuals who were involved in past situations--and the practices that were generated to address them--simply adopted them as "the way we do things around here." Finding some official explanation is impossible, as nothing was formally adopted.)**

One such rule exists in society as a whole, and thus in every organization. Getting ahead requires that someone already at or above that next level must be willing to "sponsor" you. And no one gets into that next level until they are first speaking the language and carrying out the activities characteristic of those who are already there.

Coleman confirmed that every organization requires competent performance in your current role before you will be considered for promotion. Though that is a prerequisite, reliable execution contributes only about 10% of what is necessary.

The "sponsored from above" rule requires that your image match that of the population you would be joining. This may include the way you carry yourself, the clothes you wear, the vocabulary you use, the car you drive, the people you associate with, and your ability to fit in. There are many opportunities here for you to miss the mark!

You might claim, "I don't like playing politics. I do good work, but I do it my way--I don't care how it looks." The unwritten rule: if you don't fit in with what the norms are at the next level, you'll likely not be promoted!

You also know individuals who are always striving to look good. They dress properly, they know how to speak, and they make sure that they sit with the right people. But something rings hollow. If you want something done right, everyone knows to avoid that person. Such an individual is not likely to get ahead, either. Why? The performance criterion is not adequately satisfied!

Coleman claims one final element is crucial: exposure to the right individuals. You may be superb in your competency, and you may fit in well with the individuals at the next hierarchical level. But the right person "up there," a key decision-maker, needs to be aware of both.

Surprisingly, mid-level bosses typically don't actively promote your good work. They're not opposed to you being successful. It's just that when they obtain that rare audience with those in the power positions, they are likely working to market themselves, advancing their own careers!

You already know performance is absolutely critical, but now you've learned it's only 10% of what's required to get ahead. Coleman contends that image is 30% and exposure is 60%.

Do you accept those percentages? I struggled with them. Could Coleman's contention be wrong? Maybe. So why do I share these ideas?

I encourage good contributors to think about this concept! Do you know how you are perceived? If you are in a power position, are you explaining the unwritten rules to those under your authority? Are you providing informal mentoring, helping each individual evaluate the seemingly minor decisions they make that may have more significant impact on their lives than they realize?