



How to Get Promoted in a Recession

SEVERAL MONTHS AGO, asking your manager for a raise may have gotten you an incredulous stare. But with the worst of the economic downturn seemingly behind us, today you may have a better chance.

Since the recession began in December 2007, 6.7 million workers have lost their jobs, according to the Department of Labor. Some economists project the unemployment rate, which stood at 9.4% in July, will reach double digits by 2010. But signs that the recession is over have started to spring up this summer, including good news on the housing front and a marked rebound of the stock market.

Still, the economy will take a while to heal completely, and those looking for work may find little improvement in the job market, especially if the country enters a period of "jobless recovery," a trend typical of past recessions in which the labor market lags behind other measures of economic growth.

But if you've held onto your job through the recession, now may be the time to ask your manager for a promotion — assuming, of course, that you can prove you deserve one.

"Companies are so thinly staffed right now that any surge in their business puts pressure on them," says John Challenger, the chief executive officer of outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas. "They need to keep their key people and that gives you more bargaining room than you had before."

Here are eight tips that will help you prepare for that conversation.

Have realistic expectations

Even if business is picking up, a 10% raise may not be a possibility in this year's budget. In 2009, employers budgeted for the lowest base-salary increases in 33 years: 1.8%, down from 3.7% in each of the previous two years, according to a recent study by benefits consultant Hewitt Associates. "An employee thinking about a raise needs to be aware that there's less money available," says Ken Abosch, the compensation practice leader at Hewitt. "High performers are first in line. Companies are going to work harder to take care of who they think are their outstanding employees."

Time it right

"You do want to go see your boss after you've done something that really made an impact," Challenger says. A good time to have the talk is after you've finished a project or results have come in that make your value to the organization clear. At many companies, management meets to make promotion decisions once or twice a year: Talk with your manager ahead of those meetings.

Know what to ask for

A promotion is different from a raise, and in today's environment you may have better success asking for the former. Companies are still too mindful of the bottom line and convincing your manager to pay you more for the work you've been doing all along is difficult, Challenger says. "But when you get promoted to a higher-level job, more pay will in most cases come with that extra responsibility." If you've been given additional responsibilities in the course of company downsizings, for example — and have demonstrated that you can handle them successfully — be sure your manager is aware of your accomplishments.

Showcase your value

Your boss probably doesn't keep a list of your accomplishments – so prepare one to share with him or her before you have the conversation. “You need to convince your boss that you are truly adding value to the situation,” says Lori Dervavich, an employee performance advisor based in Hoboken, N.J. “If you can, tie a dollar amount to it.”

Keep the personal out of it

Your boss doesn't want to hear that you need to make more money because your spouse lost his or her job or that you're falling behind on your mortgage payments. “Chances are, your boss is having a hard time, too, in this recession,” Dervavich says.

Prep for the 'no'

Even if you're convinced you deserve a raise, assume that you'll hear ‘No,’ says Tory Johnson, the CEO and founder of Women for Hire, a New York-based employment company. In that case, ask when you can revisit the question: in three or six months, for example, or after a certain milestone has been achieved (such as landing a certain number of new clients). Ask for specific recommendations on what you can do to get your manager to approve your request and follow up on your conversation with an email thanking your manager for his time and confirming the details you discussed. “Then mark your calendar to follow up and get busy on making it happen,” Johnson says.

Negotiate

Turned down? Negotiate other benefits, Challenger says: more time off, a better title, work place flexibility. Or ask for a performance-tied bonus. Companies spend almost twice as much on so-called variable pay today as they did 15 years ago, according to Hewitt Associates. “The real upside pay opportunity is coming through bonus arrangements,” Abosch says.

Step up your game

Even if you're denied a promotion, now is the best time to earn one in the future. “As organizations go through layoffs, that creates opportunities for people to step up and get additional responsibilities,” says Ed Rataj, the managing director of compensation at **CBIZ Human Capital Services** (CBZ: 7.21, -0.06, -0.82%) in St. Louis. If you've been asked to work longer hours or perform additional duties, don't complain that they're not in your job description. Instead, take the opportunity to showcase your value to the company and earn that promotion for when you ask again down the road.