

MOVE ON

GET PAST RESENTMENT WHEN OTHERS ARE PROMOTED

We reward incompetence. That's the phrase Tom A. suggested when his company was looking for a new slogan. "They put out little boxes in the kitchen and in the reception area and asked employees to suggest new slogans," says the Chicago-based sales representative, who didn't want his last name used. "They got new slogans, that's for sure. Mine was probably the tamest of the bunch."

Despite promising to hold a vote on the suggestions, the boxes were quietly removed the following week, and the slogan search was never mentioned again.

Tom says his slogan was based on the feelings of several coworkers who recently learned that the "weakest link in the chain," according to Tom, was promoted to sales manager and would soon be their supervisor.

"We're talking about someone grossly incompetent," says Tom. "Someone who didn't grasp the basic responsibilities of the job and a person who spent more time talking than doing. We were shocked."

Still, Tom admits that his promoted peer did one thing right. "He made all the right friends and said all the right things, and ultimately, that got him promoted," Tom says. "It was all about the shiny person he projected on the outside and had nothing to do with the smarts and guts he needs to be a successful sales rep on the inside."

Within weeks of the promotion, two of Tom's coworkers left the company, but he stayed put. "My dad told me bad managers value good employees more than anyone because they need someone to make them look good," Tom says. "His theory was that I could make him look good, and he'd have to pay me what I deserved to keep me around."

And?

"My dad was right," Tom says. "And I found out that my boss is a better manager than a sales rep. It was still a bogus deal that he got the job, but I can't say he'd be any better or worse than anyone else. And we replaced him with a woman who actually knows how to sell, so we're coming out ahead on our numbers, which helps all of us."

Getting beyond bitterness

Joan Vernon, a Seattle-based career coach, says less talented people have been rising through the corporate ranks for years. "Sometimes it's based on a feeling a manager has when he or she hands out a promotion. Other times it's

because managers may not understand the big picture. They don't put a lot of thought into who they promote and give it to the squeakiest wheel," Vernon says.

While an undeserved promotion can prompt office gossip and an employee backlash, workers who've been passed over need to deal with their anger quickly and move on. "A staff that's filled with whiners and schemers is going to be labeled as one bad apple. 'The group will be judged by the actions of its individuals,'" says Vernon. "If you see that happening, you'll need to be the professional and gently guide your coworkers to move past their perceived injustice."

Vernon suggests asking others — and yourself — to focus on the tasks at hand and wait to see how the new promotion affects everyone before defaulting to anger. "Things tend to work themselves out," Vernon says. "Incompetent people don't last long when they get increased responsibilities. Sometimes you have to take a wait-and-see approach."

And if it doesn't work out, Vernon says you won't be the first person who left a job because you thought you were treated unfairly. "That's probably the No. 1 reason people leave one job for another," she says. "They think they deserve more money or more power than the next guy, so they look for a new job to validate that perception."

More to the story

For Robert Trenton, a retired Milwaukee school administrator who now lives in Hinckley, Illinois, "perception" is the key word any time an employee feels slighted. "When I was a teacher, I saw things my students didn't see. When I was a principal, I saw things my teachers didn't see. And when I was an administrator, I saw things principals didn't see," Trenton says. "I know the same can be said in reverse — that the person on the ground sees things the big-picture guy can't — but when a job requires you to take an expansive look at issues and find ways to solve them, you're going to make decisions based on a variety of factors, not just the ones that are obvious to others."

Trenton says employees who feel passed over for certain positions should ask for a meeting with a supervisor to address the issue. "You don't need to be combative, and you shouldn't make it personal, but it's perfectly acceptable to sit down with your boss and say, 'Hey, I'd like to keep moving up in the company. What can I do to make that happen?'" Trenton says. "You might be surprised at some of the answers. And if you're smart, you'll take those answers seriously and try to address them."

— Marco Buscaglia, Tribune Content Agency