

The Competence Trap

When Being the Most Reliable Leader Keeps You from Being Promoted

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You're the one they call when things are on fire.

- ✓ The turnaround expert.
- ✓ The fixer.
- ✓ The steady hand in the storm.

And that is exactly why you are not getting promoted. *Wait. What? Why?*

At senior levels, competence becomes currency. But it can also become containment when you are the person who stabilizes revenue, rebuilds fractured teams, protects margins, and quietly absorbs complexity. The organization begins to depend on you in a very specific way. You are no longer just talented. You are essential.

And essential people are difficult to move.

Organizations optimize for stability and continuity. They optimize for what is working. If you are the linchpin holding a function together, promoting you creates disruption. Replacing you requires investment. Rebuilding what you've built takes effort.

So instead, they praise you. They tell you how critical you are. How much they value your contributions. How important your role is "right now." It sounds like affirmation. But, it often functions as containment.

There is another layer to this dynamic.

The skills that got you here, your operational excellence, disciplined execution, crisis management, and relentless follow-through, are not the same skills that move you up. The next level demands visible strategy, enterprise influence, forward-facing leadership, and perceived potential. Now, I'm not suggesting you don't have these very competencies. They just don't see them in you.

Research from Center for WorkLife Law identifies what is known as a "prove-it-again" bias — a pattern in which women are evaluated more heavily on demonstrated results, while men are more often evaluated on perceived potential. Over time, this creates a subtle but material distinction: women are rewarded for reliability and execution; men are advanced for projected scope. When execution becomes your primary leadership identity, it can quietly anchor you in place.

Once you are too proven, too reliable, too embedded in execution, you become optimized for your current seat. The system has been built around your competence. Moving you would require someone to reconstruct what you make look effortless.

So you stay.

You continue delivering. You receive glowing reviews. You watch someone less experienced step into the role you assumed was the natural progression. The feedback is predictable:

"You're doing such important work where you are."

Translation: We have optimized around your excellence.

The invisible cost of being the steady hand is this: steady hands are rarely seen as transformational leaders. They are seen as stabilizers. Executors. Necessary. But advancement at the highest levels is not just about necessity. It is about perception. Sponsorship. Strategic grooming. Enterprise narrative.

While competence earns you entry, it's not sufficient. Once you reach a certain level, strategic positioning matters more than another flawless quarter. Who speaks your name in rooms you are not in matters more than quiet heroics. The narrative attached to your work matters more than the work itself.

And this is where the shift begins.

Strategic visibility is not self-promotion. It is narrative stewardship. It is the intentional expansion from “reliable executor” to “enterprise leader.” That shift doesn't require becoming louder. It doesn't require becoming aggressive. It doesn't require becoming political. It requires becoming intentional. Instead of reporting results, elevate the conversation.

Move from: “We reduced costs by 18%”

Move to: “What this revealed about our margin resilience strategy is...”

Instead of assuming people see the thinking behind your decisions, articulate it.

“We evaluated three structural models before choosing this path.”

“The tradeoff was speed versus sustainability.”

“Here's what we ruled out and why.”

You are not bragging. You are demonstrating executive judgment. Expand your lens publicly. If you are known for operations, speak to enterprise risk, scalability, long-term growth, cross-functional friction. When your name becomes associated with bigger questions, you begin to be perceived at a bigger level.

Build sponsors, not just supporters. Supporters appreciate you. Sponsors advocate for you when decisions are being made. Ask what the next level requires. Seek opportunities to contribute beyond your current scope. Signal readiness without demanding promotion.

And as scary as this might be, detach from being indispensable. Develop successors. Delegate strategically.

Document processes. If everything collapses without you, you will not be moved. As crazy as this might sound, replaceable is promotable.

And most importantly, speak in enterprise language. Frame your contributions in terms of risk, growth, scale, and strategic positioning. Leaders are elevated not just because of what they execute, but because of how they think.

This is not about doing less. It is about being known for more.

The goal is not to perfect your current role. The goal is to become obvious for the next one.

Do excellent work. But ensure the right people see the scope of your thinking, not just the outcome of your effort. If you don't define what you are becoming, the organization will define what you are useful for. And those are rarely the same thing.

Resources

Center for WorkLife Law (UC Law SF).

Williams, Joan C., et al. Double Jeopardy? Gender Bias Against Women of Color in Science.

Includes foundational research on the “prove-it-again” bias in workplace evaluations.

https://worklifelaw.org/publications/Double-Jeopardy-Report_v6_full_web-sm.pdf

Additional overview of bias patterns in professional advancement:

<https://worklifelaw.org/publications/>

