



## Focus on the Chicago Chapter

### Striking the Self-Promotion Balance: Demonstrating your Value Without Being the Obnoxious One in the Room

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By **Debbie Epstein Henry**[\[1\]](#)

You know those people at the office meetings and cocktail parties who tell you how great they are. You remember those instances of people bragging and how off-putting it was. In fact, you are struck by how vivid those impressions are and how those moments stay with you. The idea of coming off that self-serving, arrogant or entitled is embarrassing to you. You've sworn to yourself to never be those people.



So why read an article on self-promotion? Perhaps because instinctively you know that it's important. Whether you are aspiring for a promotion, leadership opportunity, or to get credit for managing a team or client matter, self-promotion is a critical skill you need to hone. That's because self-promotion, when done effectively, is not about aggressively seeking credit for something you don't deserve and offending people along the way. It's about demonstrating your value and opening yourself up to opportunities without being transparent or manipulative. Bottom line is if you are not able to communicate your value, you run the risk of being overlooked.

Yet even if you are convinced that self-promotion is justified and necessary, it doesn't mean you are comfortable doing it. Many people are afraid to self-promote. They worry it is obvious and awkward. They don't want to be perceived as bragging. They may feel unworthy. Or, even if they know they have to do it, they may be too self-conscious to claim their contributions. Some worry that by self-promoting, they are demanding too much and it may be an imposition on others to enlist them for help. They also don't want to battle their colleagues for a position or recognition. Others worry they are not savvy enough to navigate the internal politics of self-promoting in their workplace or network.

Women, in particular, often think their accomplishments should speak for themselves. This belief, however, comes at a cost. "Success, it turns out, correlates just as closely with confidence as it does with competence."[\[2\]](#) In other words, it's not enough to be good. Your projected confidence is just as important in how you are evaluated in the workplace as your actual competence and ability to deliver top notch work.

But even if you know that you need to more effectively convey your value, how do you get there? How do you strike that balance between demonstrating your contribution while not being that obnoxious person in the room? Here are the steps that should help:

**Be Great.** If you are going to self-promote, you want to be sure that you have a legitimate basis for doing so. It requires you to be indispensable to your colleagues and clients. It also is important that you understand your value and know how it will bring a significant benefit to others.

**Be Prepared.** Know your stuff cold. Be practiced and ready to communicate your value. Perfect an elevator speech. Be prepared to track your contributions and communicate them. If that is at an annual review, go to that review with your own agenda and punch list of what you have done and what you hope to do next. But don't wait for an annual review because it will be too late. Regular communication and solicitation of feedback is critical in demonstrating your value. Pre-meetings help with preparation too. These informal, smaller meetings allow you to assess your colleagues' inclinations before you are in a larger group.

**Observe Others.** Knowing and reading your audience is critical to effective self-promotion. Study up on who will be in the room in advance. Assess commonalities and areas that may create tension to position your recommendations so they will be received in a favorable way. Evaluate what makes others' effective, what they do that would work for you and what you don't like and why. Assess self-promoters who you think are effective, ask them directly what they do and how they cultivated their skill.

**Credit Others.** It is important to acknowledge others' contributions. An audience is more receptive to someone seeking self-recognition when that person acknowledges the expertise and contributions of others. Citing others' work is a way to do that and it should not matter if that person is a competitor. In fact, citing a competitor may demonstrate not only proper attribution but also a generous spirit and important prioritization to aspire to a larger goal or cause, beyond yourself. That said, you don't want to fawn or come off as disingenuous or someone who is seeking some sort of *quid pro quo* acknowledgement.

**Benefit Others.** If you have the ability to align your self-promotion for the benefit of your employer or another organization or individual, all the better. Forward your boss a congratulatory email from a client and accompany the email with a cover note indicating that you think now is the time to grow the relationship with the client. You will be seen by your boss as someone who is thinking about the larger goal of the company's success rather than simply sharing an accolade. Pair self-promotion with being a helpful resource. So, if you want the exposure to appear before a client and you can provide an expertise that is valuable to them, it will be an opportunity for you to self-promote as well as be a resource. Promote others where you can too. But, be sure these individuals are worthy of your praise because you are putting your reputation on the line in promoting them. Sometimes, promoting others will result in that person becoming what I call a "promotion buddy" who can in turn recommend you for opportunities as well. Promotion by others is often better received as more legitimate and not seemingly self-interested.

**Get Help.** Seek out sponsors and mentors who can help with your promotion. They may provide advice about how to self-promote effectively. If they know your work and your organization, they will be more helpful in enabling you to navigate the right tone and approach. If the people you seek out for advice are ones who can promote on your behalf, that is an added benefit. However, be careful not to ask for too much, especially when involving personal contacts for a business purpose. You need to be willing to tap

into your personal network yet be sensitive to avoid any awkwardness if the business opportunity does not come to fruition.

**Own It.** An important part of self-promotion is simply taking credit where credit is due. Many people have trouble doing this and when they are acknowledged, they deflect the compliment or redirect it in some other way. While it is gracious to acknowledge other contributors, it is also important to unapologetically say “thank you”. If you are in a setting where you are being recognized and the custom is for someone to share your accomplishments, follow protocol and allow that information to be shared. If you are asked to explain why you are suited for an opportunity, take a factual approach. Rather than say “I am a great leader”, provide an example, with demonstrated facts, of when you led a team successfully.

**Take Risk.** Self-promotion involves taking some professional risks. For example, you may have to be confrontational with a colleague who is diminishing your contribution or take a stand on an important project that is being sidelined. Evaluating whether it is appropriate to take these risks is often a separate process in and of itself.<sup>[3]</sup> But when contemplating the risk in self-promotion, you must also consider the risk of inaction.

**Make the Ask.** Effective self-promotion may require making an ask of someone. As a junior person, maybe you will want to ask to shadow a senior leader you admire to gain learning and exposure. Asking often involves understanding the challenges a person or group is facing and determining how you can be helpful. Then it may involve offering yourself as a resource and in turn, self-promoting by being the one to address the need. Practice and role play before making an ask. An initial ask may need to be small and specific. Expect that your request and effort to self-promote may be declined. You will then need to learn how to ask again. Evaluate whether and when it is appropriate to make another ask and consider factors including new circumstances, passage of time, change in decision-makers, etc.

- **Show Initiative.** Often the best way to self-promote is to stand out. This may involve volunteering for a project when no one else is raising their hand. Or, maybe it is preparing a presentation or punch list of recommendations when it’s not expected or requested. Showing initiative may result in you becoming a point person in an area where you have been struggling to distinguish yourself or perhaps it will get you one-on-one exposure with a senior leader with whom you’ve been trying to establish a rapport.
- **Pay Attention to the Details.** When you are self-promoting, just like any other form of communication, the delivery and how you convey your message is critical. You need to frame your request to maximize the likelihood of it being received positively. Be aware of your physical stance and be thoughtful about your tone. You want to convey a commanding presence but also one that is inviting and friendly. Make eye contact and demonstrate sincerity and directness. Be sure you have the right audience – decision-makers who can evaluate your desire to advance or seek a new opportunity. Also, ensure that you are in the right venue. Your audience should be comfortable and open to receiving your information. Consider the timing too. Make sure your audience has the time to reflect on the information you share.
- **Understand You Will Mess Up.** You are not perfect and you will make mistakes in attempting to self-promote. You may even jeopardize a valuable relationship that you won’t be able to reconcile. Recognize and apologize when you have gone too far. Be honest and show humility when you have over-stepped. Also, acknowledge shameless self-promotion and self-interest. Solicit feedback on how you are doing in striking the self-promotion balance. This may take the form of anonymous written evaluations. If you have a small circle of trusted advisors who can provide candid feedback, seek it out.

- **Develop a Signature.** In the end, the best way to demonstrate your value is to be original. For some of you, that may mean telling stories. For others, it may be natural to use humor or self-deprecation. Ideally, you want to be likeable and fun. And, the bottom line is you want to be memorable and make it personal.

The goal of effective self-promotion is to master the elusive challenge of being a team player while seeking recognition for your role. If you are able to identify techniques that are unique to you that demonstrate your contribution, you will gain the recognition you both need and deserve.

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[2] Katty Kay and Claire Shipman, The Confidence Gap, *The Atlantic* (May 2014).

[3] See generally Deborah Epstein Henry, *Developing a Healthy Appetite for Risk in Your Career*, Inside, A publication of the Corporate Counsel Section of the New York State Bar Association (Fall 2016, Vol.34 No.2).