Twitter Thread by Gergely Orosz

Gergely Orosz
@GergelyOrosz

How do you bring up the topic of promotions with your manager?

My 7 pieces of advice (thread)

1. Understand how proms work at your company.

2. Talk with your manager: get them on your side. If you don't bring it up: don't expect it to happen.

Do Your Preparation

Once you decided you have some interest in being promoted, start with gathering information on the basics, and assess how realistic a promotion for you is.

Understand the promotion process at your company.

Every company has a different process for promotion. While similar companies might have similar processes, but don't take this for granted. If there is information written down on the process, that's a great start. The best place to start with is asking your manager. As companies grow and mature, promotion processes change. The most common types of promotion processes I've observed are these three ones:

- **Informal promotions: managers decide who gets promoted**. Several managers getting in a room, then coming out with a list of people promoted is the typical process for smaller startups and companies. In the meeting, managers present people on their team, and the group decides if they are ready for promotion.
- **Semi-formal promotion process with a manager-heavy promotion committee**. As the company grows, getting all managers together becomes difficult and overly time-consuming. Also, the biases of the previous process start to be a lot more visible. Leadership will aim to put a process in place that is more scalable and fairer. This usually begins with writing down basic expectations for each engineering level and requiring managers to submit short documentation on why the engineer on their team is ready for promotion.
- **Formal promotion processes: promotion packages and committees**. This is the type of process companies like Google, Uber, and several large tech companies follow. It requires having clearly and extensively defined job ladders, with clear expectations at each level. The idea is to make promotions as unbiased as possible. In return for a more fair and transparent process, far more

2. (Cont'd) It's in all managers' interest to have people promoted who are already performing at the next level. Makes the manager look good! You're on the same team.

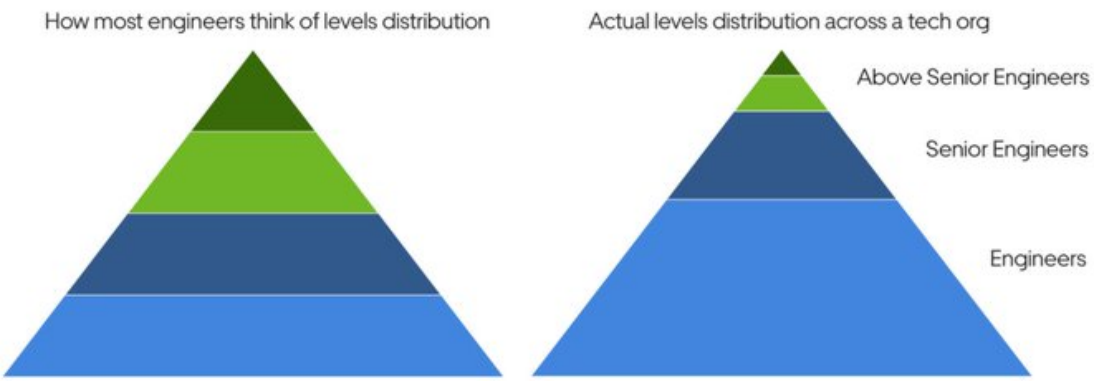
3. Be realistic about what it takes to be promoted above the senior levels. These are usually far more difficult.

Be realistic in promotions above the senior bar

Typically, being promoted up to the senior level is mostly based on gaining skills, demonstrating those, and delivering impact. However, above the senior engineer level, other factors come into play.

First, there might be a budgeting limit to how many people can be promoted to higher levels. Some places require a business case on why a lead, staff or principal engineer is needed for a given team or area. If there's no business case, you might not be able to be put up for promotion. This is true even if you might have a fair chance of being promoted otherwise.

Second, above the senior engineer level, you might find it challenging to find projects that are large and impactful enough to warrant a promotion. For example, your team might be busy shipping small, incremental features, that have little complexity, but decent business value. You almost certainly won't be promoted beyond the senior level by just doing great work here. This is a case where you need to take ownership of your career and decide how to move forward. Do you wait around for a new opportunity to come by? Do you move teams, to lead work on a complex and impactful greenfield project? Do you propose a new initiative that has a massive business impact, convince stakeholders to kick it off, and end up leading it? There are no simple answers: you'll have to take the initiative, gather support, and ultimately take smart risks in your career.



As you move up the career ladder, it gets harder and harder to get to the next level. It's a similar challenge on the developer ladder, as it is with management. Going from manager to director is usually similarly difficult, as it is going from senior engineer to staff or principle.

4. Set goals to "close the gap" that you have compared to the next level. Act like you would like if you had the title. Keep a work log.
5. Find a mentor within the company. Ask for regular feedback.

Set your sight on the promotion

Once you know how the promotion process works, have assessed yourself, and have your manager on your side, it's time to focus.

Set goals to close the gap on areas you lack for the next level

There will undoubtedly be several areas you need to either get better at or demonstrate impact. This might be ranging from areas like software engineering, executing with impact, designing solutions to complex problems, collaborating better with others, and many more.

Set S.M.A.R.T. goals that will help you get there - specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, timely. Set goals that are only dependent on you, not on external factors, like being given an opportunity. For example, if an area you've identified to improve is to get better on architecture, don't set a generic goal of you architecting a complex project. But you could set a goal of thoroughly reviewing at least one proposal per month, mentoring at least one junior engineer for 3 months on this area or reading a relevant book and presenting learnings to your team and organization the next 2 months. If you are confirmed to lead a project, you could set the goal of getting your proposal reviewed by two people senior to you, who are outside your team.

Act and take responsibility like you're already at the next level

There are two kinds of promotion cases. One is a dead-simple one: the engineer has, without doubt, been executing at the next level for a long time. The other one is more challenging: the person shows lots of promise, but there are a few areas where they fall short from the next level. This second type of promotion case is the coin-toss-type, where the outcome could go either way.

When you're working towards a promotion, aim to consistently perform at that next level: don't limit this only to your focus areas. If you're aiming for the senior level and your team's project is at risk, set up and help the whole project succeed. If your manager is asking for volunteers for a chore that is boring, but important and no one is stepping up, consider putting up your hand. On top of smashing this work, automate parts of it, to make it easier for the next person on the team to do it.

6. Don't "blindly chase" the promotion, alienating others. Stay grounded, but put in the work.
7. Don't have promotion be your only goal. Aim for professional growth, over chasing titles.

I wrote all this down in an article, with resources & templates: https://t.co/snzDxGcG01

Put in the work

If you've made it explicit to your manager and mentor that you are working towards a promotion, put in the work. In the months leading up to the nomination, double down on performing at the next level, getting things done and helping others.

Don't alienate your peers

A mistake I sometimes see engineers do is being so focused on *their* promotion is they end up damaging the team. Come promotion time, and they often end up not being promoted, as it's clear that they were the opposite of a good team player. More and more companies are careful - rightfully! - to not promote people who pull the team down.

Elbowing people out of the way to reach the goals that you set for promotion is a bad strategy. First, it's very short-term thinking. The same peers you might walk over might be asked for feedback at promotion time. But even if they aren't, it's a sign of immaturity. The more senior you get, the more you are expected to be a great team player *while* delivering solid results. It's not always an easy balance to strike. But if you catch yourself pushing ahead with your goal, in a way that upsets people on your team, consider changing your approach to be more collaborative.

Don't kick back, even when you feel things are in your pocket

Once, a developer set the goal with their manager, that if they successfully lead and ship ComplexProjectX, they will be up for promotion. The project went well, and the person went up for promotion. As this person heard the good news, they kicked back, letting go of the project, without delegating anything to others. As the project was rolling out, more and more issues surfaced, with no one taking action. Eventually, the rollout had to be reverted.

This happened right before the promotion committee met to discuss the case of this engineer. In the discussion, they agreed that while this person showed great skill in many areas, they displayed immaturity by disappearing the eleventh hour from the steering wheel. There was no communication and no good explanation of why this happened. The person was not promoted that cycle.