

PSYCHOLOGIES

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How can I make it further up the corporate ladder when someone's blocking my way? I'm a 45-year-old female company executive, have degrees in finance, corporate communication and an MBA (that I earned while working with the company). I've been with the same blue-chip company for 15 years and have worked my way up through the ranks from junior manager to arrive at my current VP position.

Over the couple of years I've felt that I'm being passed over for promotion (and internal transfer where my applications have not even been answered) and have stagnated in this same position, which I've now held for five years. I believe that this is due to my boss, the current CFO, who's blocking my way, not because of performance issues, but due to a personality clash or simply a male superiority/jealousy complex that can't bear seeing me get ahead.

He is regularly rude to me, both privately and publicly and seems to relish every opportunity to belittle me or praise anyone and everyone, except me. It's so embarrassing when this happens in view of my 25-member team, and while I wouldn't speak directly with them about it, I know that they are feeling the injustice as well. On the few occasions when I've questioned him about his unhappiness with me, he brushes it off as if I'm some hysterical pre-menopausal female who is 'imagining persecution'. I feel sure that he has the MD and HR ears and is whispering 'anti-me' propaganda to them as well.

Last month, I finally got my courage together and asked to see him to discuss my future with the company and how I could move onto new challenges. I don't know that it was a good idea as he took the opportunity to put me down in all ways, despite the positive feedback from peers, clients and my staff, not to mention my good bottom line results. I no doubt have things to learn and improve but in short, he told me that I am not 'management material' and that as long as he is there, I would not be going either up or to any other department. He told me that it was his 'professional conscience and esteem for the company' that has 'forced' him to come to this conclusion!

I don't want to leave the company that I love and have worked hard with, but I am at my wit's end to know what to do. I'm feeling some kind of purposeful harassment with this, but I don't want to tell tales – and who would I tell them to, when he's obviously systematically poisoned my reputation to everyone? I know I have the drive and skills to go further, and am furious that this one little man seems capable of holding me back, and for the moment, that I seem to be accepting the situation.

I'd be grateful to have any strategies and advice you could give me to get around this stumbling block, while retaining my self-dignity and without further tarnishing my professional reputation. I am normally quite strong and forward thinking, but this situation has really gotten to me and I'm not seeing straight. Thanks.

First of all thank you for writing in; I sense it's taken a lot of courage to get this far, and do know that you're not alone in your situation.

The first observation I'd make is that from the tone of your letter it seems as though your own confidence is being challenged at the moment and when that happens things can seem a lot worse and we are much more sensitive to things and less able to see them objectively. That isn't to say that what happening isn't real but you'll be even better equipped to handle it and use different strategies if you feel stronger inside.

So to start with I want you encourage to focus on building and maintaining your own confidence. Pick your acquaintances wisely at the moment and surround yourself with the positive people in your life who care about you and value you the most. At the end of each day, spend a few moments reflecting and writing about what you're most proud of and what skills and talents you brought to those situations to make them so positive. You might also consider some assertiveness training that will help you to express yourself more confidently especially with your boss.

Although you don't want to leave this organisation, at some point you may chose to, and it might be the best decision at that time, so why not boost you confidence a little in the meantime and update

your CV- you'll be amazed at how much there is to add, and how good it feels to do it. We don't recognise and celebrate our accomplishments nearly enough so this is a great time to do just that.

Create your personal action plan. You mention that your boss says you'll never make it to a management role, but as a VP with a team of 25 you already have, so this is just not a realistic assessment. Most big organisations I know of have some form of appraisal system and a personal development plan that connects (at least in theory) to it. You don't mention one in your letter so if it exists is it specific enough that you can take meaningful action or not; in other words does it focus on training needs or behavioural changes that are clear and easy to understand? You need specific detailed feedback and that needs to be about behaviour rather than generalised statements about who you are. Ask for specifics in person with HR present, and ask for them to be documented and filed with HR. Then sit down with HR and agree what steps would best fit the bill – formal training; on the job coaching; mentoring or something else. By the way, it may be easy to think HR is 'in' on a conspiracy...but HR is comprised of many people. If you're stuck, ask someone you can trust in the organisation who they'd recommend you speak to.

Also, think about whether you might represent or signify a different time; sometimes old bosses leave 'ghosts' in the organisation – were you especially close to or considered to be the prodigy of a previous boss, who, for whatever reason is not as highly respected now?

Find another mentor/sponsor formal or otherwise.

If you've been in the organisation for 15 years and risen to a senior VP position my guess is that you know a lot, and you know a lot of people! Who in the organisation is a key influencer? Who else could support your development. Some organisations have formal mentoring schemes. If yours does, find out who arranges this and ask them for a mentor. If your company doesn't, take the initiative – ask a few key people if they'd be willing to help you develop further and act as your mentor. Oh, and by the way, a 'no' isn't a reflection of you; good mentors are often well sought after and they just don't have the extra capacity...but you can ask!

Consider some relationship coaching

We can never understand others' motivations however hard we try, but if you believe this is down to a personality clash or jealousy, you might want to consider some relationship coaching which can help you and your manager to explore the dynamics of your relationship. It may also help to develop alternative ways of looking at it and agreeing the behaviours that would help to create a more positive working relationship. If you suspect your boss might resist try broaching it with HR first.

Consider the possibility....

And finally if you really believe there are grounds for a much more formal complaint of harassment then seek some specialist help from an employment advisor.

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