



Are You Executive Level Material? 10 Tips to be More Promotable

By Jean Kelley

Any successful executive will tell you that there's a game in business. If you're not willing to play the game, you can't win at it. So while many people aspire to reach the executive level in their company, they won't. In fact, most people don't make it past the \$80,000 per year income level simply because they don't play the game.

Why won't they play? "*I hate business politics,*" they say. But who said "business politics" had to be a negative thing? For example, if your boss does something commendable in the company, invents something new, or makes a great speech, it's okay to congratulate him or her. That's not being political or a "kiss up"; it's called being gracious and having decorum – two things that will help you climb the corporate ladder.

Aside from your technical skills or job-specific abilities, other big components of the game include your comportment, how you look, how you speak, your attitude, and your daily habits. Following are the key tips to consider in order to make it into the executive level suite.

1. Claim your space.

When you're walking in the office, you need to look purposeful and centered. Scurrying, looking harried, or trying to blend into the background will make you appear as though you lack confidence. Instead, walk with your full height and claim the space around you. People need to view you as someone on a mission – a mission to the top.

2. Build your confidence.

Contrary to popular belief, confidence is not about self-esteem or self-worth. In fact, someone can have a low level of self-esteem and still become a high-level executive, as the person's low self-esteem could be driving them to succeed. True confidence is simply the belief that you can do things well. If you doubt your ability to do things well, simply look back at your record of accomplishment. Use those past successes as a way to build your confidence so it's apparent to others as well.

3. Speak up.

During meetings, always weigh in on the topics discussed. Don't leave a meeting without having an opinion about something or you will quickly get a reputation for being "wishy-washy" or not concerned with the company's success. If you're in a meeting and the discussion turns to something you're unfamiliar with or is not part of your department's duties, look engaged anyway. Always remember that the people above you are watching you, and everything you do – or don't do – counts.

4. Build social capital.

Building social capital across the board is critical to your upward mobility. Not only should you build social capital with people within your department, but you should also build it with people in other departments and in other companies who might be a resource for you. Social capital simply means building connections with people. Find out some personal information about others, such as their hobbies, their birthday, and their kids' names...and then talk about those items occasionally to build rapport. Remember this: People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. When you're on your way up the ladder, you need to treat people

like people and not like objects. Get to know your peers. You never know if one day a peer will be your boss, and even if they aren't, they can make your work life very stressful.

5. Learn about business.

To make it in business you have to know about business. This includes reading about your industry as well as other industries to learn how different companies handle things. If you're well read you can give examples from other industries and companies of what worked and what didn't. Remember that in order to be promotable you have to be on top of your game at all times; being knowledgeable is one way to display your competence.

6. Do what others won't do.

In every department there are a few things that need to get done (or that are important to the boss), but no one wants to do them. Find out what those are...and then volunteer for the tasks. Yes, some people will call you a "kiss up," but that's okay. Ultimately, you have to please your boss and to some extent your peers and direct reports, not the nay-sayers who have little chance of reaching the top.

7. Get a mentor.

If your company has a mentoring program, take advantage of it. If you don't have access to such a program, get a mentor on your own. Look through your network of people and find someone who is at or near the level you aspire to be. Invite the person out to lunch and talk business with them. Learn what they did to get where they are. When you feel enough rapport and comfort with the person, ask if he or she will mentor you. Most people are honored by the request and will say "yes." If the person declines the request, don't take it personally. Simply find someone else to learn from.

8. Look professional.

Tattoos and piercings are popular these days, and if you want one, by all means get one. However, when you're at work, keep the tattoo under your clothing as much as possible and remove visible piercings from your face or tongue. Today, it's extremely rare to see executives with visible tattoos and piercings. Twenty years from now, it may be more common and acceptable to see tattoos and piercings in the executive suite, but for now, keep them hidden at work if you work in a corporate setting.

9. Dress at the top of your level.

People do judge you by how you look. For example, if you're in a position or company where everyone wears jeans and t-shirts, you should dress a notch higher. If you're a man, wear khakis and golf shirts, and if you're a woman, wear slacks or a skirt with a tasteful top. A good rule of thumb is to dress as if you were meeting with your top client. What attire would be professional yet comfortable to accommodate a key client meeting? Additionally, no matter where you work, casual day does not mean shorts and flip-flops. If an executive sees you dressed like that, they're going to view you as a "kid." Even an iPod in your ear can make you look like a kid. When you're on your way up (usually in the 25-40 age bracket), the last thing you want is to be called a kid.

10. Communicate effectively.

How you communicate, both verbally and in writing, can make or break your career potential. Using poor grammar, foul language, or an inappropriate tone make you appear less intelligent. Most executives are very polished when it comes to their communication skills. If your communication skills are lacking, find a resource (a class, a book, a mentor, or a coach) to help.

Get Ahead Today

Realizing your goal of attaining an executive level position is possible. You simply need to go beyond your technical or job-specific skills and add some focus to your executive presence.

After all, you can't become an executive if you don't act or look like one. By concentrating on these ten areas and keeping your skills up to date, you'll reach the executive suite sooner than you ever thought possible.

About the Author

Jean Kelley is the founder of Jean Kelley Leadership Alliance. Her Faculty and Trainers have helped more than 750,000 leaders and high potentials up their game at work in the US and in Canada. Coupled with her books, "Dear Jean: What They Don't Teach You at the Water Cooler," and "The Get a Job Keep a Job Handbook," Jean has earned the name North America's workplace coach. For information on leadership programs and availability email jkelly@jeankelley.com or go to www.jeankelley.com.