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I often receive questions from officers who wonder how to improve their chances for promotion. After serving on nine selection boards, I hope I am reasonably qualified to provide advice. Although I cannot answer all these questions in a single page, I offer some guidelines that may be of general use.

— CAPT Mark Hardy

There is no magic formula for promotion. Every career is unique, and every competitive category has different requirements for promotion. Even within a competitive category, specific designator and career path milestones may vary. Nonetheless, some common elements characterize records of officers who are selected for promotion.

The primary standard for excellence in a naval career is sustained, superior performance in positions of increasing responsibility. Promotions are made with the expectation that the officer will demonstrate leadership skills commensurate with the next higher rank. Rarely is technical expertise the sole criterion for promotion. Thus, many officers who excel at a technical skill, but neglect to develop their leadership abilities (or simply lack leadership abilities), may find themselves “topped out” at the rank of lieutenant commander (LCDR) or commander. What may have worked well in the past may not work well in the future; and if no one has counseled the midgrade officer that the rules are changing, it is possible to charge headlong into a dead-end career.

Nowhere is this danger so present as in staff or restricted line communities that value a particular expertise (e.g., medical designators or the new 1605 information professional). Because these careers often involve the daily use of a specialized

Promote Yourself

skill, it may be easy to forget that the skills that make an officer an outstanding LCDR may not be the skills that make an outstanding commander. As a result, some officers are unpleasantly surprised when they learn they have failed selection for promotion, in spite of what seems to be a competitive record.

Boards apply different standards for promotion at each paygrade. As stated before, although each competitive category is different, the following general qualifications tend to get officers promoted on time.

Lieutenant Commander (O-4). Promotion rates to O-4 tend around 85 percent to 90 percent (percentage may vary, depending on designator). Basic premise for promotion: show up, and don’t screw up. There are usually a sufficient number of lieutenants eligible for promotion who are not drilling regularly to constitute the 10 percent to 15 percent that are not promoted. Some boards may leave billets “on the table” by not promoting the full number of officers eligible. Even boards that may promote all fully qualified officers may choose not to do so. This is not necessarily bad. It sends a message to marginal participants that the Navy values participation; and if an officer chooses to be inert at the paygrade of O-3, perhaps they shouldn’t hold the paygrade of O-4. Thus, don’t assume you’ll be promoted if you have significant gaps in service, or have not drilled in years.

Commander (O-5). Promotion rates to O-5 tend around 70 percent to 80 percent. At this level, demonstrated leadership is an important plus: officers with excellent performance as a XO or OIC, or especially as a CO, are usually promoted. Basic premise for promotion: stay off the bottom. Records consisting mostly of early promote (EP) and must promote (MP) grades will win out over those with mostly promotable (P) or below. Don’t forget – officers who are above the zone are competing for the quotas assigned to officers in the zone (see “Get in the Zone”, March 2004). This may drive down the actual in-zone

selection rate well below the advertised percentage. Again, any significant gaps in service work against you, unless you send a reasonable explanation in a letter to the board.

Captain (O-6). Promotion rates to O-6 tend around 50 percent to 60 percent. However, the FY-05 URL O-6 board left 53 quotas on the table, plus selected 15 above-zone officers, making the effective in-zone promotion rate only 35 percent. Boards are requiring a higher standard of performance to be selected to captain. Basic premise for promotion: demonstrated leadership. Failure to accept positions of responsibility as an O-4 or an O-5 rarely translates into a promotion to O-6. Command is best. However, the selection rate to O-5 command at recent Apply boards has been around 8 percent. Thus, some officers may select for O-6 without ever having held command. They usually have done well in XO and OIC tours, and break out well against their peers. For officers who are ranked 1 of 1, the board will compare trait average to reporting senior cumulative average to gauge the relative standing of the officer, as well as look for qualifying comments in the FITREP narrative. Commanders who accept challenging leadership jobs, and do well, usually make captain.

There is only one place to find command billets – the Apply board. Although XO and OIC jobs are advertised, they are not always billet-specific, as a CO often selects his or her own leadership team. Contact the unit CO in advance to determine how leadership jobs are assigned, and ask how many will be in your competitive category.

You can’t cram for a selection board. It requires years of steady contributions to the Navy that are documented properly in reports of fitness. Consult with a career mentor to see if you’re on the right track, and invest in a NRA Record Review a year or more before you are eligible for promotion. The bottom line is, take ownership of your career, your record, and your future.

Next month: Writing effective “brag sheet” FITREP inputs. 📄