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I just finished reading an article describing 20 qualities that are designed to get you from the server room to the corner office on the top floor. While I don't necessarily disagree with the 20 qualities described, my first thought when reading them was—perhaps it's not everyone's goal to be a CIO or CEO. Many in IT love the technology, and the higher you go up in the organization, the farther you are separated from the technology that got you into the field in the first place.

As I sit in the corner office on the top floor for the second time in my career, having started out as a programmer, I can think of at least 25 things you can do to climb whatever career ladder you choose—whether it's to the top of the IT pyramid in your organization or to be the best programmer/engineer/analyst (fill in the blank) in the business.

## 1 Master written communication

If you want to move up in any organization, you must be able to construct a well thought out, grammatically correct, spell-checked (yes, I feel I have to say this) memorandum, e-mail, report, bid response, project plan, etc. This can be a weakness for many in IT, and it is something that has to be worked on if it does not come naturally to you. Get yourself a copy of Strunk and White's [Elements of Style](#). A class at a community college is helpful. At least start paying attention to the grammar help that Microsoft Word offers.

## 2 Master verbal communication

As important as it is to write clearly and concisely, you also have to be able to speak clearly. It does not matter if your audience is one person or a hundred. No stuttering, no ums, ahs, or jargon. No mumbling, staring at the floor, or hiding behind a document. You need to be able to convey that you know what you are talking about and that you have confidence in yourself. This takes practice (literally, go stand in front of a mirror and speak) or join Toastmasters or take a speech class at night. Hone this skill!

## 3 Be a self starter

Go to your supervisor and find work. If you are assigned work, start early and finish early. If you know what needs to be done, do it if your work environment allows it. Ask permission if you need to—but get it done. Supervisors and management LOVE self starters.

## 4 Perform quality work

This goes hand in hand with the quality above. Develop a reputation for getting things done right—the first time. If you can become one of those people who can be counted on not only to get it right, but to deliver an excellent product, you will be successful.

## 5 Develop good listening skills

Engage your mouth when necessary, but keep your ears open at all times. Learn to be a good and thoughtful listener. It will aid you in your work, you will develop a reputation as being easy to talk to, and most important, you will learn what is going on around you.

## **6 Don't be a gossip**

Develop a reputation for being a confidant. By all means LISTEN to what is going on (I call it intelligence gathering), but don't be a grouser.

## **7 Know how to behave**

Actions and behaviors that are appropriate in small team meetings among your co-workers are not necessarily appropriate when addressing a team of vice presidents. Know the difference and act appropriately.

## **8 Deliver on your promises**

Become known for keeping your word and delivering on your promises—and if you can't, let people know why.

## **9 Be honest in your dealings**

If people “can't trust you as far as they can throw you” or think you always have a hidden agenda, you will go nowhere fast. Conversely, being known as an honest broker and a truth teller will gain you much credibility when working with others.

## **10 Be a willing collaborator**

You don't have to give in on everything, but be willing to be a partner on efforts led by others. If people find you easy to work with, you are more likely to have more opportunities presented to you.

## **11 Be knowledgeable**

Don't talk about things you don't know about. Don't be afraid to say, “I don't know but I will get back to you.” Also, stay well read and—while you might not be an expert on every topic—make sure you can talk intelligently about most topics in your area.

## **12 Be a quick study**

One of the hallmarks of good leaders is the ability to quickly gather information, interpret it, and use it in decision making.

## **13 Be prompt**

Lateness is interpreted as slothfulness or the inability to manage your time properly. If at all possible, be early! Just-in time-is good for inventory management, not your time management.

## **14 Don't disregard your image**

First impressions are hard to overcome and people do judge you on your appearance. While you don't have to dress like you are straight out of a fashion magazine, your attire speaks for you, whether you like it or not.

## **15 Get out of your cube**

Meet people within your department and outside it. You have to gain exposure and also make yourself comfortable mingling with people outside your area.

## **16 Learn the business**

Whatever the core business is for your organization, learn it. Also learn what it takes to support that core business. It never hurts to know statistics and facts about your organization. This will help you empathize with your clients.

## **17 Be empathetic**

Being able to see things from another person's perspective, regardless of whether you agree or disagree, will help you immensely no matter what you are doing.

## **18 Don't be a drama queen**

Learn to quickly determine what's a genuine crisis and what isn't and act like you have things under control. You can scream, cry, pout, or whatever later in private. Emotional outbursts are not welcome in the workplace.

## **19 Be a critical thinker**

You have to be able to see the forest AND the trees. Learn to look at all the information and perform a quick analysis to determine what are causes, what are effects, and what variables come into play regarding any problem.

## **20 Be yourself**

People can sense someone who is not genuine. Keep in mind that humbleness is a good quality, as no one likes a pompous person, but don't be afraid to toot your own horn occasionally when you deserve it.

## **21 Take the next step**

When it is obvious what the next step might be in a project or product, take it! Unless you are being micromanaged, don't wait to be told to do the next logical step in something if it is within your purview to do so. This can get you in trouble if you have really heavy-handed management, but in most cases, people will be glad you did.

## **22 Treat people kindly**

Treat people at all levels of the organization with courtesy and respect. You never know when and where you will encounter them again. Abide by the golden rule. Treat people the way you wish to be treated.

## **23 Remember that it's a small world**

Word travels quickly, people have long memories, good deeds will be rewarded, and slights are never forgotten. So do not burn any bridges and do not try to make any enemies—you never know where people will show up again in your life.

## **24 Be sincere**


Linus knew something special when he was sitting in that pumpkin patch. While there is no Great Pumpkin (Sorry, Linus), people do appreciate sincerity. If you make a sincere effort to accomplish something, it will be noted.

## **25 Don't be afraid to ask why**

Don't ask for explanations in a whiny way, but in the form of, "I'm trying to better understand X; can you help me gain a better understanding by explaining why we do X?" You would be surprised how much you can learn with that simple phrase.

Well, there you have them, my 25 rules for excelling in what you do and getting promoted. If you can master these, you will be well on your way to wherever you want to go, whether it is moving into the corner office, being the star consultant, running a data center, or running your own business. These rules have worked for me, and they are pretty much how I approach life in general. At a minimum, you will finish each day with the knowledge that you have done the best you can. These are the kinds of qualities I look for in employees, and I'd bet that most employers would promote someone who had them. I hope they work as well for you as they have for me.

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