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CAREER COUCH

Taking a Rain Check on a Promotion

By MATT VILLANO

Q. Your boss has offered to promote you to a managerial position, but you'd rather keep your current job. How can you decline the opportunity without derailing your career?

A. It is important to follow your heart, but you need to do it in a way that conveys a commitment to the group as a whole, says Phil Wilkins, chief executive of Diverse Wealth Systems, a management consulting firm in Lexington, Ky.

"You have to be diplomatic," he said. "It's O.K. to say, 'No thanks,' but you need to couch it in a way that convinces your boss the decision is the right one for both you and the company."

Q. Are there valid reasons for rejecting a promotion?

A. Most managerial positions come with a higher salary, but they also bring increased paperwork, additional hours and, usually, a new boss. Sometimes, promotions involve relocation as well. Beverly Kaye, chief executive of Career Systems International, a talent management company in Scranton, Pa., said that any one of those could be enough to dissuade an employee from accepting a new role. "If an employee is happy with the way things are, every major change is going to be cause for concern," Ms. Kaye said.

On a more fundamental level, managers do something rank-and-file employees don't — they manage others. For some people, leading and prodding subordinates is as appealing as camping in Antarctica. Before taking on a managerial role, Ms. Kaye said, employees should ask themselves what they want from their careers.

"A key to accepting or declining a job is a fundamental understanding of who you are and what you want," she said. "The last thing you want is to wake up one morning and ask, 'How did I get myself into this?'"

Q. How should you inform the boss of your decision?

A. Schedule a private, face-to-face conversation, and open by thanking the boss for his consideration and support. Tell him you're flattered at being offered the opportunity for advancement, but note that this isn't the right time for that kind of change.

Explain your decision in a firm yet humble tone. Lauren Stiller Rikleen, executive director of the Bowditch Institute for Women's Success in Framingham, Mass., said employees needed to highlight what made them think twice about taking the new job.

"Say nothing about why you're declining the promotion and it raises eyebrows and makes you seem untrustworthy," she said. "You've worked there for a while. You owe the boss some sort of explanation."

If the boss expresses disappointment, don't apologize. Stever Robbins, an independent career consultant in North Cambridge, Mass., said employees should convey a sense of decisiveness, even if the decision was one they had agonized over.

"In anthropological terms, you don't want to give off prey behavior," Mr. Robbins said. "Don't hem and haw — your goal

is to say, ‘No’ to the new assignment while keeping the image of yourself as a strong and capable person in the boss’s mind.”

Q. Should you recommend someone else for the position?

A. Probably not. If your boss offered you the promotion, he thinks you’re the one to do the job. Dr. Robert Maurer, a clinical psychologist in Santa Monica, Calif., said that nominating a colleague could offend the boss if it seemed to call his original decision into doubt.

“Nobody wants to be insulted when they’re giving you a gift,” said Dr. Maurer, author of “One Small Step Can Change Your Life” (Workman, 2004). He added that questioning whether you were truly qualified for the new responsibilities had the same effect.

“Even if you don’t think you’re right for the job, trust that the boss knows what he’s doing,” Dr. Maurer said.

Q. What risks do you run by turning down the new job?

A. Your boss might think you’re not interested in advancement, and might never consider you for promotion again, or even start reducing your responsibilities.

Go out of your way to show the boss you are not complacent. Stress that your decision is based on circumstances that may change over time. Inquire about opportunities to help out in ways that won’t alter your routine as much as a new job.

Areva Martin, managing partner of the Los Angeles law firm Martin & Martin, said employees should also offer to take professional development courses and sharpen their leadership skills so they’re ready for other opportunities. “Just show you care,” she said. “If you demonstrate that you’re willing to learn new skills, then you gain more credibility and the boss sees you as someone who may someday be interested in a promotion.”

Q. Can any good come of staying put?

A. Lots. If you’re happy in your current position, retaining it should keep your job satisfaction high. If you’re part of a team, declining a promotion could also enhance camaraderie with co-workers who will remain your colleagues, not your subordinates.

Most important, Jerald Jellison, professor of psychology at the [University of Southern California](http://www.usc.edu), said that a discussion about a promotion could be a great springboard to a broader conversation about your future. While many companies have formal career planning, it never hurts to chat about where you’d like to see yourself in five years. “Ironically, declining a promotion could present a great chance for you to plan ahead,” he said. “If your boss knows what you want and what you’re willing to do to get it, the next promotion that opens up just might be a better fit.”

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