

# INSIDE A PROMOTION PANEL

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WHAT DO SELECTION BOARDS LOOK FOR IN DECIDING WHOM TO PROMOTE?  
HERE IS A “TOP TEN” LIST OF TIPS TO MAXIMIZE ONE’S CHANCES OF CAREER ADVANCEMENT.

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BY JOHN NALAND

**A**fter 18 years in the Foreign Service, I had the opportunity last summer to sit on a selection board for the first time. I learned a great deal while reading over 1,000 efficiency reports on nearly 200 mid-level FSO generalists. Below are the lessons I took away from that experience. Although they represent the views of just one person serving on one board for one competition group, I think that other Foreign Service members might benefit from these insights from inside a promotion board.

## The Basics

The purpose of selection boards is to identify Foreign Service members whose skills, experience and qualities establish them as being ready to perform at the next higher level. Those skills, experience and qualities are spelled out in the procedural precepts and core precepts that are negotiated between State’s management and AFSA.

Having participated in those negotiations from 1999 to 2003 as AFSA vice president for State and then AFSA president, I know that careful attention is placed on using the precepts as a mechanism to shape the Foreign Service of tomorrow. In other words, the precepts instruct selection boards to recommend for promotion only those employees who exhibit the skills, experience and qualities that the department and AFSA have identified as being needed to meet the demands of America’s 21st-century diplomacy.

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The mechanics of how the boards go about their work were well described in the May 2004 *Foreign Service Journal* article “Preparing for Promotion Panel Season” by David Jones and Stephen Smith (available online at <http://www.afsa.org/fsj/2004.cfm>). The article does contain one editorial glitch that was noted in a subsequent issue: the typical board spends 20 minutes (not two) reading each employee’s performance file.

## A Caveat

Before I list tips that may be of use to employees interested in rapid promotions, let me express one note of caution. While promotions are important (providing a vote of confidence in one’s performance, the opportunity for greater responsibilities, and more pay), they are not everything. Arguably, the goal of a Foreign Service career is to enjoy and make the most of the journey, not to take an unbroken series of overwhelming assignments in an effort to claw up the ladder to some high-level job that may or may not ever materialize. Employees who focus only on getting the next promotion risk falling into the trap of “always becoming, never being.” They risk getting to the end of their Foreign Service journey without having enjoyed a rewarding personal life (for example, family, friends and hobbies).

## Ten Tips

What, then, do selection boards look for in deciding whom to promote? The precepts list many things, but below are what I see as being the top considerations. While many of these “tips” may seem obvious, I think it is useful to remind ourselves of them. The quotes in each section are taken from the precepts, which can be read on the State Department Intranet at <http://hrweb.hr.state.gov/pe/regulation.html>.

• **Credit = Performance Times Difficulty:** “Creditable performance under unusually difficult or dangerous circumstances is particularly relevant” for promotion consideration. Translation: Just like judges for Olympic gymnastics or diving, promotion board members look not only at how well a job was done but also how intrinsically difficult the job was to do. As a result, employees serving effectively in highly demanding jobs and/or in difficult locations generally will be promoted more quickly than employees serving effectively in jobs that are perceived as being less difficult.

• **Potential:** “Promotion is recognition that a member has demonstrated the capability of performing the duties and responsibilities required at a higher level.” Translation: Promotions are not rewards for prior service, but are instead extrapolations from that service. For example, notwithstanding the above first tip, employees who take tough jobs but fail to perform well in them are unlikely to be promoted ahead of their peers.

• **Decision Criteria:** “The Core Precepts provide the guidelines by which Selection Boards determine ... promotability.” Translation: In reading evaluation reports, boards consider performance in the 29 specific skills listed in the core precepts (also called the “Decision Criteria for Tenure and Promotion in the Foreign Service”). Each skill is listed in three levels of accomplishment (junior, mid-level and senior). Boards judge whether the employee is performing below, at or above the level of accomplishment appropriate to the employee’s current grade.

• **Overseas Service:** “A significant portion of the career must be spent in assignments abroad ... [and] boards are instructed to consider ... demonstrated competence in service abroad when reviewing members for

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promotion.” Translation: Foreign Service members who have not served abroad in many years are limiting their promotion potential. While the State Department tries to accommodate employees in difficult medical or family situations (especially employees who have such difficulties later in their careers after many overseas assignments), it is a fact of life that the Foreign Service needs members who are ready, willing and able to serve abroad.

• **Fair-Share Service:** “Boards are encouraged to weigh positively credible performance at hardship and danger pay posts ... including ... Iraq and Afghanistan.” Translation: All Foreign Service members need to do their fair share of hardship assignments. Those who do so generally will be promoted more quickly than employees who do not — assuming that they performed well. One should note, however, that taking an assignment to a hardship and danger-pay post does not guarantee a promotion. (Full disclosure: In chronological order, my overseas assignments have been at 35, 0, 15 and 5-percent differential posts.)

• **Leadership and Management Skills:** “An employee’s leadership and management skills should be given particular importance when s/he is being considered for promotion.” Translation: Selection boards are not

to promote brilliant policy wonks who abuse their staffs, supervisors who discourage dissenting views, or employees who fail to lock their safes at night.

• **Training and Skill Development:** “Boards should attach special value to an employee’s demonstrated commitment to upgrading their professional skills through training.” Translation: Boards give positive credit to those who use FSI and other training to improve their performance and/or raise the level of their unit’s performance. To do so, boards review employee profiles (formerly PARs) and read long-term training evaluations to see what training employees have had.

• **Foreign-Language Proficiency:** “Boards are instructed to duly consider foreign language excellence which enhances the member’s contribution to the mission.” Translation: Boards review employee profiles and read language-training evaluations to see what proficiencies employees have. They give credit to those who use their foreign-language skills to advance their bureau or mission performance plan goals.

• **Functional Proficiency:** “Boards are instructed not to penalize employees for taking *periodic* assignments out-of-cone or out of specialized skill group” (emphasis added). Translation: Boards may “penalize” employees who take numerous assignments out of their cone or specialty after tenuring if those assignments do not appear to be serving any well-thought-out career development purpose. This is especially true for those boards charged with reviewing employees by functional cones or specialty.

• **Broad-Gauged Officers:** “The department’s goal in creating the multifunctional skill code is to ... expand the pool of broad-gauged officers prepared to assume senior leadership positions.” Although the State De-

partment and AFSA recently agreed to abolish the multifunctional skill code, the preference for broad-gauged officers will be a key feature of the classwide competition that will replace multifunctionality for mid-level FSO generalists beginning in summer 2005.

### What Not to Do

In addition to deciding which employees to recommend for promotion, boards must also identify employees for low-ranking. The precepts identify numerous things that may be grounds for that designation. They include: failure to carry out assigned tasks, low productivity or work poorly done, an inability to work effectively and cooperatively with others, and a pattern of failure to safeguard properly classified material and information. In practice, low rankings may also result from a significant, but otherwise non-fatal, shortcoming that

is cited in more than one efficiency report over the most recent five years.

While boards may not low-rank employees for the following reasons, they do constitute grounds for mid-ranking (i.e., not recommending the employee for promotion): a small but noteworthy performance flaw, an unproductive assignment pattern, or the lack of an important skill. Many mid-rankings simply result from an employee's failure to keep up with his/her higher-performing colleagues who are busy following all or most of the 10 tips listed above.

### Tips for Raters

Selection boards may only evaluate employees based on the documents contained in their official performance folder. Such items include efficiency reports, long-term training reports and award nominations. Obviously, the drafting of those documents is a critical supervisory respon-

sibility. Here are a few tips for raters and reviewers:

- **Specifics:** As the employee evaluation form itself makes clear, raters and reviewers need to provide specific examples of performance. Without concrete examples, praise of an employee's performance will ring hollow.

- **Context:** Boards not only need to know what the employee did, but also why it was important to the accomplishment of U.S. policy goals. But don't go overboard. Reports should be about the employee's performance, not a mini-briefing paper on the bureau, mission or host country.

- **Hyperbole:** It will be news to no one that many evaluation reports suffer from "grade inflation." But raters and reviewers need to exercise caution. Boards read hundreds of reports and often see reports from several years on the same position and/or on multiple employees in the same sec-

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tion. If different reports credit several employees with the same single-handed accomplishment, boards may discount them all.

• **Writing Style:** Raters and reviewers must keep in mind that they are writing for boards comprised of one public member and probably several Foreign Service members who have never served in that bureau or post. Therefore, it is essential for drafters to spell out all acronyms. In addition, drafters should avoid producing a full page of unbroken text. A little white space after or between paragraphs makes it much easier for boards to read the document and thus focus on its content.

### Final Comments

I will conclude by answering the three most frequently asked questions that I have gotten from colleagues about my service last summer on a selection board:

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*Promotion panels are looking for employees who exhibit the skills, experience and qualities needed to meet the demands of America's 21st-century diplomacy.*

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*Q: Was it easy to read through the inflated verbiage in order to decide who merited promotion, mid-ranking and low-ranking?*

**A:** Yes. Most reports provided the needed specific examples of perfor-

mance and placed them in the context of their impact on mission accomplishment. Weighing that information against the job description and work requirements statements, it was not difficult to judge who was ahead of, in the middle of, or falling behind their peers.

*Q: Were some employees disadvantaged by poorly drafted reports?*

**A:** Rarely. I did not see many poorly drafted reports. When I did, there were always three to six other reports from other years by which to evaluate the employee.

*Q: Was the promotion process fair?*

**A:** Yes. I saw no hint of favoritism or discrimination during board deliberations. Although many efficiency reports were inflated and a few were poorly written, I still found it possible to decide who met the standards of their class and demonstrated the potential to serve at the next higher level. ■

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