

PREPARING FOR PROMOTION PANEL SEASON

WHETHER YOU VIEW A STINT ON A PROMOTION PANEL AS A PUBLIC SERVICE OR THE EQUIVALENT OF JURY DUTY, HERE ARE SOME TIPS TO MAKE THE EXPERIENCE LESS ONEROUS.

BY DAVID T. JONES AND STEPHEN T. SMITH

Each year, scores of active-duty Foreign Service personnel are tapped for service on a promotion panel. Not all are senior-level (two FP-4 employees were on the 2003 S-VI board “to review the official performance folders of office management specialists in class FS-6”)

but four career ministers and a public member reviewed the files of MC officers for promotion. The basic rule is that you don’t rate your peers or superiors. Panelists are a mix of Washington-based and overseas employees. Some actively volunteer, while others say in the course of discussions with the Human Resources Bureau that they’re willing to serve. Others are between assignments or in Washington for some reason and are “volunteered.”

Those who have been toiling in cold climates may welcome the prospect of two months in lovely, semi-tropical Washington during the summer, but many Foreign Service employees regard it as the equivalent of doing jury duty, at best. (The most cynical may view it as an opportunity to do unto others as they have been done unto.)

Although the uninitiated may assume selection for a promotion panel is akin to being struck by lightning, it is actual-

ly fairly commonplace. For the 2003 promotion process, 17 boards were convened, consisting of 93 individuals. We anticipate the same number of panels for 2004. There is one public member on every panel, but that still leaves 76 slots for Foreign Service employees.

In addition, two boards met separately to determine performance pay awards, incorporating another 11 individuals.

Also, on an irregular basis, there are special panels convened to review grievance cases and possible errors regarding promotion. Finally, in keeping with the concept of a unified Foreign Service, State Department officers serve on the promotion panels of other foreign affairs agencies, such as the Foreign Agricultural Service.

If you project these numbers over the 20-plus years of a standard FSO career, especially when you move into more senior levels (as you do not rate your peers or superiors), you can conclude that there is a fair chance that

you will eventually be one of “the chosen.”

Incidentally, the concept of the “public member” may seem puzzling. Why should the State Department subject its most important procedural function — the selection of its best and brightest employees — at least partly to an outside educator, consultant, reporter, or the like? After all, this is not the norm for intelligence agencies, military services, or Justice Department lawyers, let alone for state and local officials, such as police or fire departments.

The answer is simple: State believes that to combat the impression of elitism so often cited in commentaries critical

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of U.S. diplomats, greater openness in their promotion is obligatory. For that reason, the public member has been part of the process for over a decade, an innovation widely regarded as a success. These individuals are selected on the basis of several factors: prominence in their professions, being “well and favorably known” to senior people at State, and (where possible) demographic representation. (Although one might imagine them to be babes in the thickets of State Department bureaucratise, this does not appear to be the case.)

Let the Games Begin

Let us assume that you see the promotion panel experience for what it is: a public service for your diplomatic colleagues to determine who is most ready for greater responsibilities. What can you expect, and how should you prepare?

You can come to the promotion panel assignment “cold”—just as you can go to a new post with minimal preparation or begin your swimming lessons by being thrown into icy water over your head. But it is advisable to familiarize yourself with the procedural precepts for the selection boards (which are revised at least in some detail each year) as well as the detailed commentary on the skills to be assessed for promotion: leadership; managerial; interpersonal; communication/foreign language; intellectual; and substantive knowledge. In 2004, the procedural precepts will also include community service and security awareness.

To be sure, these documents are not as exciting as the latest whodunit, but they are no more arcane to work through than the instruction manual for programming your VCR/DVD player. And the criteria should already be at least somewhat familiar, given that they are the same ones under which you have been writing the year’s efficiency reports.

In addition, it is useful to at least read through the annual set of department cables discussing lessons learned from the previous year’s panels regarding effective Employee Evaluation Report preparation. While these comments are directed toward raters/reviewers and employees being rated, they also provide insights into the thinking of previous board members.

Given the sheer volume of the work, some might also recommend taking a speed-reading course. But in most cases that is not necessary.

Into the breach. Not all boards meet at the same time of year or for the same length of time; panels reviewing mid-level candidates for promotion tend to have heavier workloads than those considering senior employees. In any case, panels are released when they finish their work.

Following the director general’s “atta boy, go-get-’em” introductory speech, panelists settle in for a lot of reading. One five-person panel that co-author Steve Smith served on last year reviewing FS-2 political and management officers had to assess approximately 160 administrative and 240 political officers over an eight-week period, going through copious files covering each employee’s entire career. The numbers vary but that is a fairly typical workload.

The process. The basic procedures have not changed much for over a decade. The candidates’ files are divided into batches of about 40, which are randomized, not alphabetical. Smith’s panel did the management officers first and then the political officers. All panel members read every file in the batch.

One significant recent innovation is that all files are now stored on computers rather than on paper. There is a significant advantage in this approach as it permits all panel members to access the same file simultaneously instead of having to wait for

someone else to finish it. Moreover, a screen menu permits you to examine not only each year’s EERs but the “kudos” (e.g., meritorious step increases, departmental commendations, and so forth) sides of the files at the same time. Circumstances for viewing are comfortable; the screens are large, and the lighting is good. However, if you prefer to have a “hard copy” in your hands, tough luck—files cannot be printed out. (Welcome to the paperless universe!)

The reading process is extended and exacting. Some panels face upwards of 5,000 pages of material—usually densely packed and sometimes arcanelly drafted. The time constraints are tight, leaving only about two minutes per file. Fortunately, the traditional mandate to “read back five years or to last promotion” of EERs now is less rigid. Depending on the circumstances of the individual, panel members may only read back one to three years at this stage.

Remember that you have good technical support staff available to clarify points. They have years of experience and provide the year-to-year continuity and institutional memory that facilitates panel action.

Ranking the candidates. When all panel members finish each 40-file tranche, they vote, ranking each candidate as “promotable,” “mid-ranked” or “low-ranked.” If you know someone well (perhaps you’ve been their rating officer at post), you are supposed to recuse yourself, but casual acquaintance (being in the same car pool or having mutual friends) is not grounds for recusal. And in any case, everyone knows your choices.

To be “promotable,” a candidate must be so designated by at least one panel member. There is a legal congressional requirement to identify 5 percent as “low-ranked,” and the rest are “mid-ranked.” This process continues until all of the batches of candidate files have been reviewed.

From traditional wisdom about over-inflated EERs, you might expect to be faced with attempting to determine the virtues of 100 angels contending to become archangels. That, however, is not the case. Indeed, it is almost eerie the extent that panel members agree on the placement of specific files. The “promotables” typically establish a pattern of success early in their careers and continue to perform at that level, while the “mid-ranked” majority are productive, valuable members of the Service but not usually destined for its highest levels.

• **The promotables.** Once the rough cut of all the files is complete, the Office of Performance Evaluation provides the actual promotion numbers available — invariably fewer than those the panel has deemed worthy. Then the real challenge begins. There is detailed comparison — using a complex point-scoring system — for the promotables. For each 40-candidate tranche, every panel member must assign four “10s”, four “9s”, and so on down to four “1s.” Those scores are then totaled. Thus, with a five-person panel, the absolute top score a candidate could receive would be 50 and the lowest would be 5.

At that stage, the candidates are rank-ordered and the panel discusses the lineup. Evaluators are free to change their scores — but if you add a point to one candidate, the scoring system forces you to subtract a point from another officer. Final placement is determined by total score of the five panel members; ties are voted on as well. Those just above and just below the “promote line” may also be revoted upon: one common approach is to reread the files of the five candidates on each side of the promotion line, going back to the last promotion, before producing a final list of individuals recommended for promotion.

Although more candidates may be ranked for promotion than actually promoted, that should not bother you.

First, promotion numbers could change. Second, it is important for the record that an officer be designated as promotable rather than simply “mid-ranked.”

• **The low-ranked.** This remains a degrading element of the “up or out” system. It smacks of the ancient British naval custom of courts-martial, even executions, for relatively less successful officers simply to keep the others in line. Just as for the “promotables,” the panel re-examines the “low-ranked” to determine whether they are more appropriately placed in mid-level. If they are low-ranked, the panel determines whether they should be referred to a performance standards board for possible selection-out; a justification statement is required when an individual is referred to that board. We also noted who should get counseling letters (these are required for the low-ranked, but can go to other officers, including those promoted).

What to Look for — Or Watch Out for

• **Time in class.** Even budding superstars should demonstrate light-up-the-sky brilliance for a number of years consecutively to be rewarded. But steady, if not stellar, performance can also lead to promotion. All else being equal, length of service is the determining factor.

• **Actual accomplishments.** It is tedious, but necessary, to sort through the EER verbiage and determine whether the candidates have had a variety of hardship assignments and whether their assignments had substantive content rather than a coordination role with no responsibilities. The superstaffer in Foggy Bottom may be highly visible and adept at working the system, yet do little beyond shuffle paper faster than his or her peers and jump higher when a principal yells “frog.” Conversely, a lower-level FSO at an obscure post or deep in the bowels of the department

may have advanced U.S. interests through substantive accomplishments, and that should count even if the job seems to lack flash.

• **Quality, not quantity.** Although delivering hundreds of demarches or drafting sheaves of cables demonstrates that a candidate is busy, a Foreign Service officer is more than a FedEx agent. It is what the candidate accomplishes substantively for U.S. mission objectives that should be noted. The same is true of predictions about trends in the host country: yes, it is nice to know that the officer is a good fortune teller, but it is important only if the prediction is incorporated into U.S. policies, contingency plans, or other activities that have a direct effect on the bilateral relationship.

• **Overseas time.** Diplomatic life overseas is less and less “fun” for many reasons; the hatred and anger of host-country residents can be palpable. In particular, being blown up used to be a once-in-a-lifetime concern, but now it is a day-to-day fear in many, perhaps most posts. Thus, those who have willingly served in hardship posts deserve special attention.

• **EER drafting skills.** You will have to slog through a lot of dense, even turgid, prose, replete with acronyms and jargonesque commentary. Consequently, when you encounter a rater or reviewer who is a rhetorical craftsman, it is tempting to reward the rated employee out of sheer relief. But what should catch your attention are specific examples that substantiate the all-too-commonplace superlatives. Yes, the candidate walks on water and turns it into wine during the stroll. But the important point is exactly how much distance was covered and what vintage is the wine.

• **Grade inflation.** In Lake Wobegon, Garrison Keillor tells us, all the children are above average. Judging from the rampant grade inflation in EERs, apparently many of them grow up to be Foreign Service

officers. Honest, let alone serious, criticism is rare, even though the evaluation precepts insist that no one is perfect. The vast majority of raters and reviewers genuinely want to avoid damaging their colleagues' career prospects, even when they are not performing well and could benefit from constructive guidance early rather than later. But raters are also painfully aware that tough written criticism, especially early in a two- or three-year assignment, is likely to poison the rater-ratee relationship throughout the remainder of the tour — and perhaps prompt a counter-strike grievance action from the rated officer, who concludes that there is nothing to be lost by a litigious riposte to criticism.

• **Constructive criticism.** The “areas for improvement” box inspires all manner of creativity. Most writers are aiming to craft minimally critical prose that will pass your sniff test and

allow the employee to be mid-ranked. But also be alert for the raters who insert a stiletto so skillfully that the ratee doesn't even notice the wound.

• **The employee self-statement.** This section of the EER has appropriately earned the “suicide box” label. It may well be the most important writing that an FSO does each year — partly because the acceptable style of comment keeps changing, so the rated officer must be alert. Most are now smart enough to avoid reacting to the criticism of verbosity with five pages of rebuttal, but you will still find inappropriate challenges to comments by the rating or reviewing officer and jeremiads against department policies. At the other end of the spectrum, deciding whether to toot one's own horn (and how loudly) remains an art form. Watching FSOs waver between the Scylla of self-deprecating modesty and the Charybdis of exuberant self-congratulation is instruc-

tive. But at a minimum, when the EER reflects a hallelujah chorus of praise, the smart officer avoids writing “AMEN!” in all caps.

Service on a promotion panel can be a meaningful career experience. Just as a stint with the Board of Examiners provides an insight into the quality of new entrants, an assignment to a promotion panel offers a chance to assess whether the system is fair in its judgments of officer quality. Perhaps it is unsurprising that the general conclusion is that the process is scrupulous and fair (those successful within a system rarely denounce it), but the mechanics of the process are constantly reviewed; the American Foreign Service Association passes on the annual precepts for promotion; and public members provide a regular sanity test. But ultimately, the system is only as effective — and fair — as those administering it. ■

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