

NOT PROMOTED



Last year was one of my best. My records were stellar, I won a few awards, I completed PME, had a ‘must promote,’ but did NOT get the notification I desperately hoped for. It upset me for a couple months afterwards. If you have ever been passed over for promotion, maybe you can relate to that disappointment? Do you recall the circumstances, your peer group, your academic and work preparations, your evaluations of past performance (OPRs/EPRs/records), your promote status (i.e. must/definitely promote, promote now, promote, do not promote, or stratification), your hopes and plans? What were/are your feelings after not promoting?

The military promotion system responds: the higher you go the less available quotas exist, missing promotion means re-focus and continue efforts, there’s likely a reason you weren’t promoted, and deciding who is above/below the promotion line is not a painless decision. While these responses are valid, none heal a wounded heart.

For those that have missed their promotion, we struggle reflecting on questions like: “Why wasn’t I promoted?” “What could I have done differently?” We reflect on job performance, our academics and testing, experience, integrity of the promotion system, and from whom we sought advice. Retrospect offers the opportunity to make course corrections, but many of us internalize the experience as ‘I’m not good enough to promote.’ For those who have been passed over for promotion, here’s a few suggestions to bounce back after receiving a non-selection:

- **Feel the Feelings.** Feeling disappointed if you don’t promote is normal. Give yourself permission to ‘go there.’ It may mean mourning, voicing frustrations to your partner, or calling a friend. Ignoring these feelings or acting tough can lead to self-destructive thoughts/behaviors like resentment, entitlement, finger-pointing, and toxic behaviors. Allowing yourself to explore those feelings helps by lessening overwhelming feelings, allowing one to regroup & move forward.
- **Be Professional.** You’ve experienced the range of emotions, now what? You’ve met people and perhaps it was you at one point, that when they didn’t get promoted disappointment leaked out. It’s often unconscious behaviors like blaming, complaining, or treating others poorly that reveal one’s internal struggle. No matter what, be professional. Even if someone else got the promotion you think you deserve, be professional. Being professional often sets the stage for openness and willingness to receive feedback.
- **Validate Your Identity.** What identity expectations are not fulfilled when passed over for promotion? Failing to promote is not always within one’s ability to control, so don’t set yourself up for failure by tying title/rank to identity, feelings of success, or value as an Airman. It is commonplace to desire affirmation for character and performance. Failure and disappointment are life-long challenges, but these don’t mean one’s identity is flawed.
- **Assess Why I Want Promotion.** It’s important to ask ‘Why do I desire promotion?’ Is it position, authority, pay, prestige, life goal? What value does promotion hold in my life? Once you answer it’s easier to wrap the mind/heart around not promoting. Remember, ‘I *AM* good enough because promotion does *NOT* define my worth. Tomorrow’s story is not written.’
- **Request Feedback.** One of the most vulnerable challenges in life is to ask for feedback from fellow Airmen, subordinates, supervisors, Command team, partner, or others. Outsider perspectives can be extremely helpful to shape careers. How do I come across? What are my shortcomings? How am I not meeting expectations? Feedback may provide “missing components,” but there isn’t a blueprint for promotion.
- **Plan Your Strategy.** Strive to plan the next phase of your journey. Develop your skills to fill performance gaps. Investigate the numbers (authorized vs. filled). Focus on the 10-20 year long-game AND tomorrow’s short-game. Oftentimes a ‘no’ closed door, is either a ‘not yet’ or re-direct to a ‘yes’ open door you haven’t considered before. Discovering what you’re not wired to do, is just as valuable as discovering strengths for your long-term strategy.
- **Value of Faith Perspective.** What does your faith/God/spirituality say about promotions? Consider how your faith/spirituality is involved making sense of disappointment. Engage your faith to support your resiliency come back.

The bottom line, all your hard work toward promotion is NOT a waste, nor are you not good enough to promote. Whether or not you promote, your efforts developed your personal skillset, experience, and organization in the process. You are a better version of yourself than a year ago, despite not having a new rank/title. A wise person once said, ‘In all toil there is profit, but mere talk tends only to poverty.’ Recognize the profits of your efforts, even when that profit doesn’t manifest in promotion.