



[How to's](#), [Recruitment](#), [Succession planning](#)

## So you've passed someone over for a promotion – now what?

**By Kim Thomson**

---

21 January, 2021

It can be tough to let someone down in an internal hiring process. Two HR experts tell us how to walk that tightrope.

In-house hiring can be a smart, efficient option for organisations. For employees, knowing that promotions are on the table can be an incentive to stay at the company.

But for HR managers, internal hiring can be a delicate process. The fallout can be a little, well, awkward.

Not everyone may agree with the hiring choice. This can lead to tension, [jealousy](#) or, in the worst-case scenario, resignation. For the person that missed the promotion — especially if a colleague was hired ahead of them — it can be pretty disheartening.

After all, rejection stings — quite literally. [Studies have shown](#) that when a person is rejected, their brain lights up in similar ways to when they experience physical pain. That's where the term "heart break" comes from.

Karen Gately, founder of HR consultancy Corporate Dojo, says some businesses shy away from hiring internally.

"A lot of people don't internally advertise, because they're afraid of the rejection conversation," she says.

Nicholas Vayenas, managing director of Liquid HR, agrees the process can be "tricky" but ultimately beneficial.

So how do you avoid alienating the people who don't get the gig? We put the question to our experts.

### **Have fair and consistent protocols**

It goes without saying, but make sure you have a formalised and consistent process in place to manage in-house job candidates.

Vayenas says making sure everyone is clear on the selection criteria "is absolutely critical".

Gately agrees. "That should always be step one. Be really clear about what technical capabilities but also professional or interpersonal engagement kind of capabilities the candidate will need [for the role]," she says.

While some employers might choose to take a less formal approach when dealing with internal candidates, Vayenas suggests mirroring your external recruitment process for ease and clarity for both parties involved.

"[Internal candidates] should still go through the same application process, the same interview process, and the same feedback process," he says.

This all needs to be made clear to the internal candidate from the outset, he adds. If candidates are prepared for what to expect, they could be less likely to deem the process unfair should they be unsuccessful in getting the promotion.

## Be upfront and honest

When breaking bad news, be prepared to talk it through and allocate enough time to do so - there's nothing worse than the feeling of having a bomb dropped on you and no time to process it before you're expected to respond.

"The starting point is to have some 'care factor' and compassion," says Gately.

"It's not hard to work out that [unsuccessful candidates] will be sad, disappointed and feeling rejected or feeling not good enough."

Make it clear they are still appreciated, she says, "just because they weren't right for that opportunity, that doesn't mean they're not right for [the] business."

You might be tempted to 'soften the blow', so to speak, by sugarcoating the feedback or offering a vague reasoning, but that won't help them in the long run. Honest feedback can help people accept the decision as reasonable. After all, it's how they'll determine where they need to improve.

"If the individual put their hand up for a leadership role, but they have appalling interpersonal engagement skills, have the courage to explore what that means," says Gately.

"You might say to them, 'Look, we don't see at this point in time that you have the capabilities to build the right type of team environment - here's *why* we think that, and here are the things you would need to shift for us to have confidence in your ability to do that.'"

Your mode of communication is also important.

"Start by not emailing people," she says. "Have honest face-to-face conversations with candidates."

It's extremely uncomfortable to share bad news with a candidate, especially someone who you might have been working with for years.

In an [article](#) for the *Harvard Business Review*, author Heidi Grant wrote: "When you're doling out [negative] feedback, you're in fight-or-flight mode - you want to get it over with. Your brain isn't working optimally; you become awkward and less attuned to the emotions of others."

This is why it's best to go into these conversations with a plan of what you'd like to say and the outcomes you're hoping to achieve - this will ensure you're offering valuable feedback rather than getting caught up in the emotions of the conversation.

“Don’t leave them rudderless. Don’t leave them feeling like they don’t know where to go now.” – Karen Gately, founder of Corporate Dojo

When delivering feedback, time is of the essence. In the same *HBR* article, Joseph Weintraub, a professor at Babson College, notes that news of the successful internal candidate will likely spread fast, whether that’s through the [rumour mill](#) or if the employee announces the news on LinkedIn, for example. So make sure you get in first – if the unsuccessful candidate discovers they were unsuccessful from anyone other than HR or a trusted senior manager, it could fan the flames of their negative response.

Don’t put people forward if they’re not ready

“The biggest complaint I hear from internal candidates is that ‘the organisation put me through the process, but had absolutely no intention of hiring me,’” says Vayenas.

He says it might be best to let people down gently before they throw themselves into the recruitment process – don’t let them get their hopes up and spend time and energy preparing a pitch for the role.

Of course, that’s not an easy conversation to have, but he says it will save a lot of pain in the long-run.

For example, a courageous leader might say: “I don’t think it’s a great idea for you to go through this recruitment process, because I don’t think you’re at that point yet. But here’s what we’re gonna do about it. Here’s how we’re going to get you there.”

### **Set people up for future success**

To avoid potential ‘flight risks’, it’s crucial that unsuccessful candidates feel supported.

“Don’t leave them rudderless,” says Gately. “Don’t leave them feeling like they don’t know where to go now, like they don’t know how to move forward.”

After you’ve broken the news to them, schedule some time at a later date (so they’ve had time to digest your feedback) to develop a solid plan to help them realise their ambitions.

“[Say to them,] let’s look at what strengths you currently bring to this kind of opportunity, where the specific development needs are, and put a plan in place to help you develop those capabilities.”

Vayenas agrees: “A six to 12-month developmental program to bridge those gaps, or the criteria in which they fell short, is absolutely critical.”

This program could involve mentoring or coaching within the company — on an agreed timeline and with concrete outcomes. Give them opportunities to see the skills you're looking for in the future.

You could also try scheduling in 'skip level meetings' - where employees have regular catch ups with those two levels above them - or asking them to join the occasional meeting with senior employees. This can help them to visualise where they're heading in your organisation - who knows, they might even find a passion within a different arm of your business that they hadn't considered before.

Vayenas offers some other tips for maintaining engagement and productivity levels in an unsuccessful internal candidate.

"That could be anything from ensuring that they get involved with [stretch projects](#), internal secondments, taking on some additional duties, through to some good, old-fashioned classroom learning to upskill," he says.

Whichever route you choose, make sure the program is [agile enough](#) to adjust as the needs of your organisation change. The skills they needed for a promotion in 2019 are probably not what you're looking for now.

Most importantly, help them to see the bigger picture.

"They've got to be able to see a future and some progression within the organisation after receiving the bad news."

**TAGS :** [internal candidate](#), [internal promotion](#), [job promotion](#), [succession planning](#), [training and development](#)



1 Leave a reply

---