

Promotion Panels: Exploring the Promotion Process¹

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Introduction

Promotion is an often discussed topic among Commissioned Corps officers. There are a lot of questions surrounding the process of developing a promotion package and how the package is evaluated. Often, officers turn to mentors seeking guidance on how to prepare a successful promotion package. Thus, mentorship plays a significant role in a successful career and in promotion. In May 2015, an initiative was launched to identify ways to

¹ Disclaimer: The comments and advice provided in this document are based mostly on the panelists’ views, opinions, and perceptions surrounding the promotion process. The mentoring subcommittee incorporated references to current promotion advice documents (e.g., the scientist benchmarks) to provide clarity to the panelists’ comments and observations.

more actively engage mentors in the mentorship relationship, and to provide mentors with tools to assist them in their role. Through discussions within the mentorship subcommittee, it was recognized that many mentors may have been promoted during a time when promotion success rates were much higher than current success rates. The subcommittee identified a need to develop guidance that mentors could use, in addition to their own experience and previously provided guidance, to help their mentees through the promotion process. This guidance document will reflect the experiences and insights of officers who have been recently promoted. The findings and discussion reported herein is intended to be used as an adjunct to already available promotion information provided on the CCMIS website.

The most obvious and effective way to provide information on recent promotion experiences was to talk to officers who were successfully promoted within the last few years. Thus, the idea for Promotion Panels originated. The subcommittee decided that the panels should first focus on one temporary grade promotion, thus promotion to TO-5 was selected for exploration. The success rate for TO-5 promotion dropped from approximately 40-45% before 2013 to approximately 25-30% after 2013. The subcommittee set out to organize small group discussions with officers promoted to TO-5 in 2013, 2014, and 2015 about their promotion experience. The panels were held by teleconference, with 3-4 officers and 2-3 subcommittee members participating in each panel.

A list of questions was developed which formed the basis of the discussion. The questions covered several topics, including:

- Reasons for a successful promotion
- Reasons for being unsuccessful on one or more attempts at promotion
- Deployments
- Awards
- Achievements
- Supervisor support
- Leadership activities, including SciPAC involvement
- Mentorship
- OS and ROS content

All Scientist officers promoted to TO-5 between 2013 and 2015 were contacted and invited to participate. A total of 37 officers were promoted during this time period. Of these, 26 responded and agreed to participate in the panels, five responded but were unable to participate, five did not respond, and two people responded and provided written responses (time differences did not permit panel participation). The 26 officers who agreed to participate were split into two groups: officers promoted on their first TO-

5 (10) promotion attempt and officers promoted after two or more attempts (16). Officers were provided with the discussion questions prior to the teleconference. Panels were held during March, April, and May of 2016. Each panel was moderated by one subcommittee member with at least two other members taking notes about the discussion. Each panel discussion lasted approximately one hour.

After the conclusion of the final panel, all notes were compiled and the results evaluated. Statistics are noted where possible in this document. However, since each panel held was a unique experience, not all data was recorded for every panel and each panelist (e.g. highest award at time of promotion or if billet was supervisory). Therefore, such quantifications are given in terms of the numbers that are available and will not add up to the total number of panelists that participated. Also, a positive response should be weighted more heavily than a negative response (such as 5 out of 10 officers participated) since some officers counted in these numbers might be due to a lack of an indication of participation rather than a negative response of no participation. Even with these limitations, there is a lot of excellent information obtained from the Promotion Panels. This document presents the findings of the subcommittee from the Promotion Panels.

Promotion Panel Topics and Discussion Results

Promotion Success and Failure

The first area of discussion during the panels focused on promotion success or lack thereof. Officers that were promoted on their first attempt were asked why they believed that they were successful and officers that were not promoted on their first attempt were asked why they thought they were unsuccessful. Furthermore, officers who were unsuccessful on their first attempt were asked if they had made changes to the subsequent promotion packet that they thought led to their ultimate success.

Reasons contributing to a successful promotion package included:

- Early preparation
 - Reviewing the benchmarks each year and in advance of promotion year to ensure that as many of the areas as possible could be addressed
 - Developing application materials (e.g., CV, OS) well in advance of the end of the year deadline for submittal
 - Obtaining and using examples of CVs and other application materials from officers who were previously promoted to the same rank
 - Obtaining and incorporating feedback from formal and informal mentors into the application package
- Highlighting leadership roles and impact of your accomplishments

- Achieving high COER scores as a measure of good job performance
- Serving in a billet that was higher than their current rank
 - Most, but not all, were in O-6 billets when eligible for TO-5 promotion:
 - 8 of 11 officers promoted on their first attempt held O-6 billets
 - 6 of 19 officers promoted after two or more attempts held O-5 billets
 - 13 of 19 officers promoted after two or more attempts held O-6 billets
 - Some were in supervisory billets
 - Many were not in supervisory billets
 - Those not in a supervisory billet focused on leadership demonstrated in their billet, in projects or activities they engaged in
- History of awards
 - The number and level of awards varied greatly among the officers
 - Most mentioned obtaining at least one of the benchmark awards (OUC or CM)
 - 8 of 11 officers promoted on their first attempt had received at least one CM (or higher) award
 - 12 of 14 officers promoted on subsequent attempts indicated that they had received a CM at the time of the promotion; 6 officers indicated that the CM was earned after an unsuccessful promotion attempt
- Leadership in outside activities, such as SciPAC, COA, deployment teams, or academic and professional organizations
- Several officers indicated that they aimed for the O-6 benchmarks, even though they were being considered for TO-5 promotion

Reasons that officers thought contributed to an unsuccessful promotion attempt(s) included:

- Lack of proper preparation
 - Waiting too long to prepare package
 - Failing to include all the proper documentation
 - Awards not showing up in eOPF in time for promotion board review
- COER scores of 5s and 6s with few or no 7s, or just a failure to get all 7s
 - Some panelists suggested that this was due to differences in evaluation style of civilian supervisors; i.e. using the same scoring paradigm for COERs as used for civilian scoring
- Lack of mentorship to assist in the process
 - Failed to seek feedback from others on components of promotion package
- Difficulty in demonstrating impact due to nature of work
 - Some officers mentioned that the nature of their work is not conducive to traditional measures of success such as health improvement changes and quantifiable measurements

- Lack of proper emphasis of benchmarks in promotion package (e.g., leadership or experience)

Actions the officers took and/or changes that officers made to subsequent promotion packages that they believe contributed to their successful promotion:

- Increased leadership role (e.g., getting a supervisory billet or leading other work or PHS activities)
- Increased involvement in SciPAC
 - As a voting member
 - On subcommittees
- Change of billet to address the mobility benchmark (i.e., programmatic or geographic)
- Earned award of higher level than previously held (generally a Commendation Medal)
- Increased COER scores
- Focus on improving how promotion package materials were presented
- Changes in the preparation and content of the CV
 - Had CV reviewed by SciPAC (if it hadn't been previously reviewed)
 - Re-writing of accomplishments to better highlight them
 - Emphasize impact in a readily apparent manner
 - Ensure that all required sections were included and addressed
 - Revised wording to make it understandable to all promotion board members, regardless of professional background
 - Revised CV cover sheet
 - Reduced amount of overall text
 - Streamlined presentation of information
 - Use action verbs in bullets

Much of the discussion revealed information that was logical and familiar to previously issued promotional guidance. There were a few additional suggestions that officers might find useful. For example:

- One officer described how they kept a spreadsheet through the year to note milestones and accomplishments that they could incorporate in their annual COER as well as their promotion materials.
- For COERs, try to work with the supervisor to educate them about the review process and see if a fair but improved rating can be agreed upon.
- One officer emphasized that it was important to realize how time consuming putting together a promotion package was, so that you allow ample time to prepare and arrive at the best possible package.

- Many officers recommended that you assume you are not going to get promoted in that cycle and continue to work to improve your package as you are waiting to hear if you were successful. This approach helps you to prepare a strong package for the following promotion cycle if you do not succeed in the current promotion cycle.

One common theme that resonated through responses from multiple officers, whether they were promoted on their first attempt or if they were successful after subsequent attempts, was that they were unclear as to why they were successful. The majority of officers that were successful after at least one unsuccessful attempt struggled to articulate what they did differently between the successful and the failed attempt(s) at promotion. They expressed frustration at not receiving adequate feedback from promotion boards that they could use to improve and prepare for future promotions. Some officers also noted that they got contradictory feedback, such as receiving only positive feedback but not succeeding in promotion.² A common sentiment was that success was “partially dependent on luck”- who was sitting on the promotion board that year, who were the fellow cadre within that promotion cycle, and so forth. The perceived lack of transparency in the promotion process seems to add to frustration with the process.

Leadership and Achievements- Contribution to Promotion

The Promotion Panel discussion next focused on personal achievements and leadership experience. Excellence and high performance at your duty station were seen as critical components to success, though officers with these attributes were sometimes promoted only after two or more attempts. Most of the discussion revolved around how to best demonstrate leadership experience and accomplishments in the promotion package. Important aspects of this area mentioned by numerous panelists included:

- Clearly and succinctly convey the impact that you have in your position
- Demonstrate your accomplishments, project by project, as appropriate
- Convey these accomplishments in language that all can comprehend
 - Avoid acronyms where possible and define them if used
- Where possible, highlight how your work advances science or public health. Possible ways to demonstrate:
 - Peer-reviewed or other publications (e.g., government reports, white papers, internal documents, conference presentations)
 - Research findings

² Promotion boards score each officer and determine whether the officer should be recommended or not recommended for promotion. The promotion board does not necessarily know which officers recommended for promotion will be successful. Promotion success is determined by the success rate mandated by the Office of the Surgeon General.

- If not currently in a “hard science” billet doing research, clearly explain and demonstrate how your accomplishments impact and advance public health
 - On a local, national, or international level (e.g., publications, presentations, internal documents, working groups, etc.)
- Demonstrate growth in your career through your accomplishments

Additional discussion revolved around the amount and type of leadership experience that officers had, and where they gained and exercised this experience. While many had experience in SciPAC, others were minimally involved in SciPAC (if at all) but were involved in other organizations such as JOAG, MOLC, or local and national Commissioned Officers Association (COA) branches. A few officers who were in remote locations or in areas outside of Atlanta and DC/MD/VA were involved in their community and highlighted this experience in their promotion package. Others mentioned leadership roles in their area-specific professional associations. Finally, some officers mentioned leadership roles that they had held within their deployment teams. Additional common themes related to leadership were:

- Having a leadership role in one or two committees or groups was seen as more beneficial than simply being a contributor to a larger number of groups
 - However, officers mentioned that to achieve a leadership position within an organization you need to become involved and increase the level of your contributions over time. This takes foresight and planning over multiple years, potentially.
- Some officers thought that non-SciPAC activities required additional explanation and demonstration of their impact since members of the promotion board may be less familiar with those activities.
- Achieving success in leadership as well as promotion requires long-term as well as short-term planning and goal setting

Awards are a tangible way to demonstrate accomplishment and a good amount of discussion was held on the importance of awards to success in promotion. The panelists had a wide range of awards, including the types (individual, group, service, response, organization awards from SciPAC, JOAG, and others, and non-PHS awards such as Agency awards) and numbers of total awards. Awards information was included in their promotion package. Many officers cited having a Commendation Medal (CM), which is one benchmark for awards at the TO-5 level, as one reason for their success. However, not all officers that were promoted had a CM and not all officers that had a CM were promoted on their first attempt. Additional items noted by the panelists concerning awards were:

- Level of award were perceived as important if not more important than the number of awards
 - One or two high level awards were sufficient for some officers to achieve promotion without attaining a high overall number of awards
- Officers noted that a high number of awards did not ensure promotion success
- PHS awards were thought to have the most weight, but other awards could also positively demonstrate impact

- At least one officer seemed to think that Agency awards may carry more weight than PHS awards
- Others thought that awards should be distributed throughout your career
- Officers observed that learning how to write awards early in your career and taking the initiative to write awards for yourself, whenever merited, was important
- Individual awards were thought to have more impact than unit awards
- There was perceived ambiguity about the role that awards play in determining promotion success

CV Review

The CV is a crucial component of the promotion package, and discussion included content and formatting of the CV coversheet and CV. Panelists were asked if they had their CV reviewed by a mentor (SciPAC or other) or through the CV review service offered by SciPAC. They were also asked what, if any, significant changes they made to their CV between promotion cycles if they were not promoted on their first attempt. Some of the panelists' advice on content and formatting of the CV/coversheet were:

- Obtain CVs from recently promoted officers to use as an examples
- Utilize as many opportunities as possible to receive feedback on their CV and CV coversheet
- Continuously update your CV, it helps track accomplishments and prevents last minute rush to complete before promotion
- Highlight impact and make this apparent to the reader
- Use creative ways to communicate accomplishments in a manner that sets you apart from others
- Reduce text on the CV coversheet so that it was easy to read and accomplishments stand out
- Describe accomplishments with similar language as one would for award packages
- Clearly communicated leadership experience and roles
- Begin each CV bullet with an action verb
 - Statements on CV coversheet should be limited to a single sentence
- Minimize use of acronyms, and define them where they must be used
- Highlight the scope of the impact of the work- local, regional, national, international
- Explain impact and achievements in scientific field in which trained, as much as possible
- Track benchmarks through CV and try to ensure that all benchmarks are addressed
 - Make it apparent in the document that you have met or exceeded benchmarks; don't leave it to the promotion board to find information to decide if benchmarks were met

- Use the CV coversheet to describe and demonstrate long term goals and objectives and how you are unique from other candidates
 - Alternately, depending on the length of your career and the number of your accomplishments, may want to use the CV coversheet to highlight the most significant accomplishments that demonstrate an increasing level of success or responsibility through the career, rather than trying to list everything
- Have CV and CV coversheet reviewed by officers outside of your field and outside of your category to ensure that your language is clear to a broad audience
- Make sure to “sell yourself”, the CV is not the place for modesty

Mentorship

All officers on the panel agreed that mentorship was an important factor in promotion success. Many had formal mentoring agreements through SciPAC, while others had informal mentoring relationships with co-workers or other officers. Mentors were valuable in reviewing all documents in the promotion package as well as in providing advice for preparing for promotion. Mentors also provided career guidance, as you would expect, assisting with short and long term goal setting. Some notable items surrounding mentorship were:

- Six of eleven (54%) officers promoted on their first attempt had a SciPAC mentor at the time they were promoted
- Ten of sixteen (62%) officers promoted on subsequent attempts had a SciPAC mentor at the time that they were successfully promoted
- Panelists recommended that an officer build multiple mentoring relationships
 - Officers of different ranks and possibly in fields beyond their own, who can provide a different perspective
 - From recently promoted officers of a higher rank than you as well as officers with much longer service records
- Panelists indicated that being a mentor themselves contributed to their ability to evaluate their promotion package and also demonstrated their leadership ability
- Some panelists expressed concern with some information provided by officers' mentors
 - Conflicting advice received from different mentors
 - Mentor gave advice that seemed out-of-date or not in line with current practices

Panelists also shared what they thought was some of the best advice that they received from a mentor:

- Get involved and seek out leadership activities

- Demonstrate that you are a critical member of the category and the Commissioned Corps
- Seek leadership opportunities both through your agency and PHS CC organizations
- Participate and be an active leader in SciPAC
- Be proactive with your career development
 - Work with your supervisor, especially if they are civilian, to recognize your accomplishments; assist your supervisor in the preparation of CC related materials, including the COER, awards, and promotion documents
- Demonstrate that you are a leader not only in title, but through your contributions and accomplishments
- You are always your best advocate
 - You will likely have to write many documents yourself, including awards, ROS and accomplishments
- Keep a close eye on your eOPF
 - Organize documents so that they can easily be added
 - Start early on the process of gathering and submitting needed documents
 - Make sure they are labeled correctly and that they end up in the correct place in the eOPF
- Document your accomplishments with awards
- Strive to improve interpersonal skills

Deployments

There was a wide range of experience related to deployment among the panelists, from having no experience, to being a member of a deployment team but had not deployed, to having experience on multiple deployments. However, there was a consensus that since deployment is not specifically in the benchmarks, and because deployment opportunities can be limited, lack of deployment should not detract from your overall qualifications for promotion. Yet, deployment was still seen as important. Comments related to deployment included:

- Though not required and lack of deployment should not “hurt” you, having deployments was still seen as very beneficial
 - Deployment can give you a chance to demonstrate leadership or obtain additional leadership experience such as being a Section Chief or Deputy Section Chief
 - Deployments provide opportunities for unit or individual awards

- Deployments through PHS (DCCPR/RedDOG) were perceived as having more weight or given more importance compared to deployments through an officer's agency
 - 6 of 11 officers promoted on their first attempt had deployed with OFRD/RedDOG; the remaining officers had deployed with their agency
 - 7 of 16 officers promoted on subsequent attempts indicated that they had deployed with OFRD/RedDOG by the time they were successfully promoted; remaining officers reported deploying with the agency
 - Data is missing for three officers regarding their deployment history
- Deployment was seen as a component of “officership” and can be highlighted as such
- Officers can demonstrate readiness [to deploy] even if they don't have the opportunity to deploy
 - e.g., by completing the training required for FMRB

Note: The number of deployments or other deployment-related experience did not correlate with promotion success rates (number of cycles before success)

Continuing Education

The majority of interviewed officers had minimal comments regarding the impact of continuing education on promotion. A few officers mentioned that various prestigious educational opportunities allowed them to stand-out against their peers, assisted in their duty station activities, or contributed to furthering their career path objectives. Though the overall significance of continuing education was not clearly understood, all panelists agreed that it should be tracked and addressed in the eOPF and CV.

Officer Statement and Reviewing Officer Statement

Panelists were asked what information they included in their OS and ROS and how this compared to the information included in their CV. Panelists agreed that the OS focused more on officership and PHS activities while the ROS focused more on their job and accomplishments in their position. Panelists also agreed that a large amount of the information contained in either the OS or ROS was also contained in their CV, though possibly framed slightly differently. A majority of panelists drafted their own ROS which their reviewing official (RO) revised as they saw fit. A few panelists revised a draft of the ROS that their reviewing officers had drafted. Comments related to the OS and ROS included:

- Panelists incorporated examples of leadership and impact into the ROS

- Panelists used example OS and ROS from recently promoted officers to develop their own OS and ROS
- One panelist suggested including some PHS activities in the ROS to show that their RO was aware of everything that the officer was doing (i.e., supervisory support)
- Another panelist suggested repeating the information, on multiple documents (i.e., CV, OS, ROS), that would set you apart from other candidates
- Panelists reported some issues with non-CC supervisors and RO in the drafting of the ROS due to the lack of familiarity with “Corps language” and how that differed from civilian language
- One panelist commented that the ROS highlighted their growth, constantly increasing leadership and impact, as well as their higher billet
- One panelist noted that in her OS, all bullets were a single line

Synopsis of findings: Expected and Unexpected Comments

Expected Comments Regarding Promotion Process

As one would predict, discussions of the panelists included a lot of information consistent with the already available guidance on promotion from sources such as CCMIS, SciPAC, and JOAG. However, it is useful to reiterate this information as it is certainly important and represents a synopsis of the information already provided in this report. Common points raised through the panels that were expected included:

- Be familiar with and strive to achieve the benchmarks; document benchmarks clearly
- Highlight leadership experience, including growth throughout your career
- Demonstrate impact that leads to scientific and public health advances
- Mentorship is very important, both formal and informal
- “Be good at your job”- success in your position is essential for success in promotion
- You are your own best advocate
- Be proactive in your career
- Supervisors were generally supportive, very few examples of issues with support

Unexpected Comments Regarding Promotion Process

Additionally, when reviewing the comments from all of the panelists, there were many comments that the promotion panel found to be unexpected and/or significant:

- The majority of officers (74%) held an O-6 billet when promoted to TO-5:
 - O-6 at first attempt = 8/11

- O-6 at subsequent attempt= 13/16
- O-5 at first attempt= 3/11
- O-5 at subsequent attempt= 6/16
- The majority of officers felt that involvement in SciPAC was critical for promotion
 - However, a 5 of 10 of the officers successfully promoted on their first attempt were minimally or not involved in SciPAC
 - For officers promoted on subsequent attempts, 11 of 15 reported SciPAC involvement
 - Other officers chose to focus on other CC groups, such as JOAG or COA to develop and demonstrate their leadership
 - Some panelists perceived that SciPAC activities might be more heavily weighted by the promotion board since they were more likely to be familiar with these activities
- Deployments may play a larger role in promotion success than generally admitted
 - Deployment teams offer leadership opportunities that can enhance an officer's promotion package
 - Deployments can lead to awards which may also enhance an officer's promotion package
 - Deployments demonstrate an officer's flexibility, mobility, officership, and public health impact
- Awards, including number and level, did not ensure promotion success
 - Some panelist had numerous awards but were not promoted until two or more attempts
 - Other panelists had fewer awards but were successful on their first attempt
- Panelists had diverse positions
 - Some were in supervisory billets while others were not
 - Some were in research while others were in clinical or regulatory roles
- Often panelists promoted on attempts subsequent to their first felt that they made minimal changes to their promotion package
 - Changes that were cited were revision of CV and inclusion of additional experience and accomplishments
 - These panelists did not feel that the changes were as significant and were not sure why they were successful on a subsequent attempt when they had not been previously (i.e., with a very similar package)
- The CV coversheet is possibly the most critical document in the promotion package. It should:
 - Be clear and understandable to someone outside of your field
 - Demonstrate benchmark accomplishments
 - Be focused such that career growth and leadership should be clearly conveyed
- Promoted officers were diverse

- Success rates were not correlated to the type of position the panelists held
- Panelists served in a number of agencies in many different roles
- Panelists expressed frustration on the feedback that they received from the promotion boards
 - Received only positive feedback even when they were not successful
 - Received no feedback
 - Received contradictory or inappropriate feedback (e.g., lack of geographic mobility)
- Panelist expressed frustration with the perceived changing nature of the promotion boards
 - What is expected and appreciated by one board may not be the same year to year
 - Other outside influences, such as input from the CPO or a change in CPO, may result in shifting standards for promotion
 - Recommendations from one promotion board may not be relevant when evaluated by the next promotion board

Conclusion

The SciPAC Mentoring Subcommittee wanted to increase knowledge and understanding around the promotion process in order to assist SciPAC mentors in their roles. To accomplish this, the Promotion Panels group held a series of panels during which recently promoted officers, to the rank of TO-5, discussed their promotion experiences. Though a lot of the information shared was expected, the discussions were varied and rich and provided some unexpected comments about the promotion process. The panelists participated enthusiastically and were happy to share their experience and provide feedback on the process. Overall, there seems to be a lack of clarity and variability in what is critical for promotion. Many who were promoted on the first time were not sure exactly why they succeeded and partly credited luck to their success. Those who were promoted after two or more attempts were often unclear as to what contributed to their ultimate success; many felt that they had changed relatively little from year to year and were unable to pinpoint what might have been the difference. All officers stressed the need for long-term career planning and early preparation of the promotion materials. Also significant, is the reminder that all officers need to be proactive in their career and that you are your own best advocate. Finally, promotion success requires preparation, perseverance, and patience.