

CORPORATE TABOOS

*Leadership Failures We All See But No One Fixes*

**Issue #9**

# The Good Soldier Gets the Promotion

*— Why Merit-Based Promotion Feels Radical  
in Most Companies — and a Practical Merit System  
You Can Implement Without an HR Overhaul*

---

*The newsletter for leaders who prefer honest diagnosis over comfortable denial.*

## The War Story

---

The announcement went out on a Tuesday. Senior Manager, Strategy and Operations. Effective immediately. Congratulations to Howard.

Howard had been with Centara for eleven years. He knew where everything was — the shared drives organized in a system only he fully understood, the vendor relationships that required a specific kind of handling, the institutional memory of why certain decisions had been made a certain way in 2017. He was reliable, pleasant, and unfailingly loyal to his manager, who had been with the company for sixteen years and who had championed the promotion in a calibration meeting that lasted approximately twelve minutes.

Across the table in that calibration meeting — or rather, not across the table, because she hadn't been invited — was the question of Zara. Zara had been at Centara for four years. In those four years she had rebuilt the team's forecasting model from scratch, reducing projection errors by 31%. She had designed the cross-functional integration process that three other departments had since adopted. She had been the actual author of the strategy deck that had gone to the board under her director's name, a fact that was known and unacknowledged. She had also, on two occasions, respectfully pushed back on decisions she believed were strategically flawed — once in writing, once in a meeting where the director was present.

She did not get the promotion. Howard did.

In the weeks that followed, the team's two other high-tenure analysts — both of whom had been Howard's informal mentees for years — told their manager they were 'excited to work more closely with Howard.' The team's two highest performers, Zara and a senior analyst named Dev who had led the integration project alongside her, said nothing publicly. Dev began updating his resume the following weekend. Zara lasted four more months before accepting a director-level role at a competitor — a role that was, by any measure, two levels above the one Centara had just declined to give her.

At Zara's exit interview, the HR coordinator asked what would have made her stay. She was quiet for a moment. Then she said: 'Knowing that the work was the thing that mattered here. I never figured that out.'

***Political promotion doesn't just reward the wrong person. It teaches everyone watching exactly what the organization values — and the best people are always paying attention.***

## Name the Failure: The Two Currencies of Advancement

---

Every organization runs two parallel promotion systems simultaneously. The first is the official one — the one described in the HR handbook, the performance review rubric, the leadership

competency framework. The second is the real one: the informal set of signals, relationships, and cultural norms that actually determine who advances.

In healthy organizations, the two systems are closely aligned. In most organizations, they diverge — sometimes slightly, sometimes profoundly. The divergence creates two currencies of advancement: merit, which is what the official system describes, and political capital, which is what the real system rewards. The degree to which political capital can substitute for merit — and the degree to which the organization pretends otherwise — is the measure of how badly this problem runs.

### What 'Political' Actually Means Here

Political promotion doesn't require Machiavellian scheming. It includes any advancement decision that weighs factors other than demonstrated capability and potential for the next role: tenure, personal loyalty, relationship with the decision-maker, cultural conformity ('culture fit'), perceived lack of disruption, or simply the comfort level of the hiring manager. These factors are not always illegitimate in isolation. They become the problem when they consistently outweigh evidence of performance and capability in promotion decisions.

## The Three Political Promotion Patterns

Political promotion is not monolithic. It arrives in three distinct forms, each with its own justification and its own specific damage profile.

Pattern	How It Operates	The Justification Leaders Use	The Actual Signal the Team Receives
The Tenure Reward	Length of service is the primary factor. The person who has been here longest gets the nod, almost regardless of how their performance compares to shorter-tenured colleagues.	"Howard knows this organization inside and out. That institutional knowledge is invaluable at this level."	Loyalty to the organization is worth more than results. Arrive early, stay late in your career, and advancement will eventually come — regardless of what you produce.
The Loyalty Premium	The person most aligned with, supportive of, and non-threatening to the decision-maker advances. They do not challenge direction, they amplify it. They are seen as 'safe.'	"He's someone I trust completely. In a senior role, trust and cultural alignment matter as much as anything else."	Being seen as aligned with leadership is more valuable than being right. Challenge the direction, even respectfully, and you've spent

Pattern	How It Operates	The Justification Leaders Use	The Actual Signal the Team Receives
			political capital you can't afford.
The Disruption Penalty	High performers who push back, raise uncomfortable questions, or operate with strong individual voice are passed over for those who produce results more quietly. The label applied is usually 'not ready' or 'needs to develop executive presence.'	"Zara is brilliant, but she's not quite ready for the political complexity of a senior role. She needs to develop her stakeholder management skills."	Competence is necessary but not sufficient. Compliance is the multiplier. The organization rewards those who deliver without disturbing the leadership team's comfort.

## Why It Persists: The System That Protects Itself

Political promotion is not a random failure. It is a system — one that produces consistent outcomes because it serves consistent interests. Understanding whose interests it serves explains why it is so durable.

### It Protects the Decision-Maker

Promoting Howard is safer than promoting Zara. Howard will not challenge the director's thinking. Howard will not outshine his manager in meetings with senior leadership. Howard will not raise the question of why the strategy deck went out under someone else's name. The political promotion is, from the decision-maker's perspective, a risk management decision disguised as a talent decision.

This is not always conscious. Many leaders who make these decisions genuinely believe they are choosing the best candidate. The comfort they feel with Howard and the subtle friction they feel with Zara read to them as evidence about fit and readiness — not as evidence about their own risk aversion.

### It Is Invisible in the Official Process

Most promotion processes include some formal structure: a calibration meeting, a competency review, a panel discussion. These structures create the appearance of rigor without always delivering it. The calibration meeting where Howard's promotion was confirmed in twelve minutes is a calibration meeting — it has the name and the form. What it lacks is a structured comparison against defined, pre-agreed criteria applied consistently across candidates.

Without that structure, the official process becomes a ratification mechanism for decisions that were already made informally. The form of rigor substitutes for its substance.

## High Performers Leave Quietly

The people most damaged by political promotion cycles — the Zaras and Devs — rarely make noise when they leave. They update their resumes, accept offers, and give exit interviews that cite 'new opportunities' rather than 'the promotion I deserved went to someone who has been here longer and poses no threat to anyone.' The organization loses their signal along with their contribution.

The people who stay — the Howards and the junior analysts who observed the outcome and updated their mental model of how advancement works — are not the people who generate the kind of organizational learning that would correct the system. They are the system's beneficiaries or its newly calibrated students.

***The organization that promotes politically doesn't get told about it by the people who matter most. They leave. Their silence is the most expensive feedback the organization never receives.***

## What Political Promotion Actually Costs

The costs are partially visible and partially hidden, and the hidden ones are the more expensive.

Cost	Visible?	How It Compounds Over Time
Loss of high-performing talent	Partially — shows up in attrition data, rarely attributed correctly	Each political promotion cycle loses the organization's best performers to competitors who value their output. The capability gap widens each cycle.
Calibration of surviving talent	Rarely	Those who stay and observe the outcome update their behavior: they optimize for visibility and loyalty over output. The organization slowly trains its remaining talent to behave politically.
Promotion of under-qualified leaders	Eventually — but often after significant damage	Howard in a senior role is a version of the Issue #4 problem: an under-qualified person in a critical role, generating the shadow structures and attrition patterns described there.
Innovation suppression	Almost never	The Disruption Penalty specifically removes from leadership the people most likely to challenge assumptions,

Cost	Visible?	How It Compounds Over Time
		surface inconvenient truths, and drive non-incremental change. The organization becomes safer and slower.
Cultural signal amplification	Never directly — only through behavior change	Every promotion sends a message about what is valued. Political promotions, repeated over years, produce a culture that values the appearance of performance over its substance. This is extraordinarily difficult to reverse.

## The Practical Merit System: Five Components You Can Implement Now

Merit-based promotion is not a personality trait or a cultural value that either exists or doesn't. It is a set of structural practices that make merit visible, comparison consistent, and political substitution harder to execute invisibly. Here are the five components that matter most.

### Component 1: Define the Criteria Before You Know the Candidates

The single most impactful practice in merit-based promotion is also the simplest: agree on the criteria for the role before the conversation turns to who might fill it. Once candidates are in the room — even implicitly — the criteria are shaped by the candidates rather than the other way around.

For every promotion decision, define in writing: What does success look like in this role in the first twelve months? What capabilities does this require that the current role does not? What is the evidence we would look for to assess readiness? Write these down before any name is mentioned in the conversation.

#### Why Sequence Is Everything

When criteria are defined after candidates are identified, the mind works backward from the preferred candidate to justify the criteria: Howard is loyal and knows the organization, therefore 'institutional knowledge and cultural alignment' become top criteria. When criteria are defined first, the question becomes: who among our candidates best meets these criteria? These are not the same question. The first protects the preferred candidate. The second finds the best one.

### Component 2: Require Evidence, Not Impressions

Calibration discussions are dominated by impressions — 'I feel like Howard is ready,' 'Zara is brilliant but something feels off about her readiness for this level.' Impressions are not evidence. They are conclusions without visible reasoning, and they are the primary vehicle through which bias and political preference enter promotion decisions.

Replace impressions with evidence requirements: for each candidate, the decision-maker must cite specific examples of behavior that demonstrate each criterion. 'Howard knows the organization' is an impression. 'Howard independently navigated the vendor renegotiation in Q2 without escalation, producing a 12% cost reduction' is evidence. If the evidence cannot be produced, the impression cannot be the basis of the decision.

### Component 3: Structured Comparison Across All Candidates

Most calibration processes evaluate candidates sequentially — first Howard, then Zara — rather than comparatively. Sequential evaluation makes it easy to confirm each candidate's readiness independently without ever forcing a direct comparison that might expose the gap.

Structured comparison requires putting all candidates on the same scorecard, against the same criteria, at the same time. The question is not 'is Howard ready?' but 'between Howard and Zara, who more clearly demonstrates the capabilities this role requires?' That is a harder question to answer politically, because the answer requires a direct argument for why the evidence favors one candidate over another.

Political / Tenure Promotion	Merit-Based Promotion
<i>Candidates evaluated sequentially — each approved in isolation</i>	All candidates scored on the same criteria in the same session
<i>Decision-maker presents candidate, panel affirms</i>	Panel independently scores candidates before discussion; scores are revealed simultaneously
<i>Discussion centers on 'is this person ready?'</i>	Discussion centers on 'who is most ready, and what is the evidence?'
<i>Tenure and relationship are implicit factors</i>	Tenure and relationship are explicitly excluded from scoring criteria
<i>One decision-maker's champion drives the outcome</i>	Multiple perspectives required; divergent scores must be explained and resolved

### Component 4: The 'Explain It to the Runner-Up' Standard

Before any promotion decision is finalized, ask: could we explain this decision to the candidates who weren't selected, in specific and behavioral terms, in a way they would find fair even if disappointing? This is not about guaranteeing satisfaction — people will sometimes be disappointed by fair decisions. It is about whether the reasoning can survive scrutiny from someone who has a stake in it.

If the explanation for not promoting Zara is 'she needs to develop her stakeholder management skills,' that explanation must be accompanied by: specific examples of the gap, a defined path to close it, and a committed timeline for reassessment. If those three elements cannot be produced, 'stakeholder management' is not a development need — it is a post-hoc rationalization for a decision made on other grounds.

### The Transparency Test

After every significant promotion decision, the leader should be able to answer three questions about the person not selected: (1) What specific capability gap made them not ready for this role at this time? (2) What does closing that gap look like, and who is responsible for supporting it? (3) When will we reassess? If any of these three questions has no answer, the decision has not been made on merit — it has been made on something else and dressed in the language of development.

## Component 5: Track Promotion Outcomes and Audit the Pattern

Individual promotion decisions are where bias and politics operate. Patterns are where they become undeniable. Organizations serious about merit-based promotion track their promotion decisions over time and ask systematic questions about the resulting data:

- What is the average tenure of people promoted at each level? Is tenure correlated with promotion in ways not explained by performance?
- What is the demographic distribution of promotions relative to the eligible population? Disparities that persist across multiple cycles are rarely random.
- What is the post-promotion performance of promoted individuals? Leaders promoted on merit should outperform the base rate. Leaders promoted politically tend to validate the Issue #4 pattern.
- What is the attrition rate of high performers who were not promoted in a given cycle? A spike in departures among passed-over high performers in the months following a promotion decision is a diagnostic signal worth taking seriously.

Pattern auditing does not require sophisticated analytics. A spreadsheet tracking promotions, the criteria cited, and the subsequent performance of both promoted and passed-over candidates produces more organizational learning than any amount of individual calibration rigor applied without longitudinal perspective.

## A Word for the People Who Are Zara Right Now

---

This series has included, in several issues, a section for the people on the receiving end of the failure being described. This issue is no different — because there are more Zaras reading this than there are calibration committee members, and their situation deserves direct acknowledgment.

### Make Your Work Legible, Not Just Excellent

Zara's forecasting model was excellent. The board deck was excellent. None of it was legible to the calibration committee in the way that Howard's eleven years of presence were legible. Excellence that lives inside a team's output without attribution is politically invisible, regardless of how operationally critical it is.

This is not an instruction to self-promote aggressively or to perform work rather than do it. It is an instruction to ensure your contributions are named, credited, and connected to outcomes in the places where promotion decisions are made. Send the update that connects your project to the result. Ask your manager explicitly: 'Can we discuss how to make sure this work is visible at the right level?' Document your contributions as they happen, not in retrospect.

### Understand the System You're Operating In — Accurately

Some organizations have political promotion problems that are correctable — a specific decision-maker, a process gap, a culture that can be shifted with the right pressure. Others have political promotion problems that are structural and leadership-endorsed, where the correction would require changes that the people in power have no incentive to make.

The most important thing a high performer can do is assess this accurately, without wishful thinking. Staying in a system that structurally undervalues merit and hoping the next cycle will be different is a career strategy with a poor historical track record. Naming the system for what it is — even privately, even only to yourself — is the beginning of making a decision with real information rather than optimism.

### Find Sponsors, Not Just Mentors

Mentors give you advice. Sponsors use their political capital to advocate for you in rooms you're not in. In organizations where political capital matters — which is all of them — having a senior leader who will say your name when the room is deciding is not a nice-to-have. It is the difference between Zara's calibration meeting lasting twelve minutes and one where someone says 'before we confirm Howard, I want to make sure we've explicitly compared him to Zara on these criteria.'

Building sponsor relationships requires demonstrating your work to the right people over time — not through networking performance, but through genuine contribution that intersects with their priorities. The best sponsors are leaders who have seen your work, believe in your capability, and have the standing to advocate credibly. Find them intentionally.

### Quick Reference: The Merit Promotion Checklist

Step	The Practice	The Question That Proves It's Working
Define criteria first	Write the role criteria and evidence standards before any candidate names enter the discussion	Could you have written these criteria without knowing who the candidates are?
Require evidence, not impressions	For each criterion, each candidate must be supported by specific behavioral examples	Can you cite a concrete example for every claim about readiness?

Step	The Practice	The Question That Proves It's Working
Structured comparison	Score all candidates on the same criteria simultaneously; reveal scores before discussion	Does your process force a direct comparison, or does it evaluate each candidate in isolation?
Explain the runner-up	Before finalizing, draft the explanation you would give to the person not selected — with specific gaps and a development path	Could the explanation survive being delivered to Zara directly and in full?
Audit the pattern	Track promotions, cited criteria, and post-promotion performance over time; review annually	Does your data show that promotion correlates with demonstrated performance — or with something else?

## The Bottom Line

Howard is a senior manager now. By most accounts, he is doing adequately — not well, not poorly, but adequately. He has not rebuilt anything from scratch. He has not redesigned any process other teams have adopted. He has navigated the role with the competence of a person who knows the organization's history and is trusted by his manager, which is, it turns out, approximately what the role received from him.

The forecasting model Zara built still runs. Her name is not attached to it in any system. The director who signed off on Howard's promotion was asked about Zara at the next annual talent review and said, 'she was great, wasn't she? We should have moved faster.'

They should have. But 'moving faster' was not the actual failure. The failure was a system that made Howard's eleven years of institutional loyalty more legible than Zara's four years of measurable organizational impact — and that had no mechanism to correct for that distortion before it produced an outcome.

Merit-based promotion is not an idealistic aspiration. It is a competitive advantage. Organizations that consistently advance their best people, on the basis of what they've demonstrated rather than how long they've been present or how comfortable they make leadership feel, are organizations that keep their best people long enough to see what they're capable of at the next level.

***Every time the wrong person gets the promotion, you are not just making one bad decision. You are teaching everyone who watches exactly what it takes to advance here. Choose carefully what you teach.***

### Coming Up in Issue #10

Shooting the Messenger — How 'Don't Bring Me Problems, Bring Me Solutions' Culture Silences Your Best People. The employee who raised the flag on a failing project and got

labeled 'not a team player.' The system that punishes honest feedback so effectively that no honest feedback ever arrives. The final issue in the Corporate Taboos series: what psychological safety actually requires, and how to build an organization where the truth can travel.

---

*Corporate Taboos is written for leaders who prefer honest diagnosis over comfortable denial.*

**Forward it to someone who needs it. You know who they are.**