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Leadership Lesson: The Art of Successful Nominations

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Well worded and supported letters are an integral part of gaining recognition and opportunities within the academic world, both internally and externally. In academic medicine, recognition is gained through letters of support for positions, and professional opportunities are facilitated through promotions, grants, and awards. Even when there is no formal nomination process, an organized approach to submission can bring your candidate or your candidacy well ahead of everyone else's. This Leadership Lesson addresses how to put together a stellar nomination packet, how to secure nominations, and how to strengthen letters of support stereotypes.

Language and Stereotypes in Letters of Nomination

Research shows that men and women are described differently in letters of recommendation, and that these differences tend to place women into stereotypes that can disadvantage their selection. Studies of letters of recommendation for medical faculty and for chemistry job applicants revealed the following differences:

- Differences in extremes of length. Long letters were more frequently written for men, whereas short letters were more frequently written for women.
- Differences in affirmative language. "Letters of minimal assurance" (the applicant is competent, there is no reason not to hire) rather than letters of recommendation were more frequently written for women than for men. The letters for women often included "doubt raisers" and fewer terms of praise.
- Gender stereotyping language that elevated men's accomplishments and diminished women's, such as referring to women's experience as to "her teaching," "her training," and "her application," while for men referring to "his research," "his skills and abilities," and "his career." Such stereotypes "reinforce gender schema that tend to portray women as teachers and students and men as researchers and professionals" (Trix and Psenka, 2003).
- Use of more "standout adjectives" and more ability descriptors and effort descriptors for men and "grindstone" descriptors for women and their work (Schmader, Whitehead, Wysocki, 2007).

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How does addressing these differences strengthen a nomination letter? The following teaching case shows how much difference language can make:

A Lesson on Effective Nomination

The Associate Dean for Diversity of Forward Thinking Medical School (FTMS) looked up from reviewing the nominations packet for Jane Scholar, M.D., Ph.D., for the AAMC's [Women in Medicine Leadership Award](#). Sitting opposite him were the members of the FTMS's Women in Medicine Group, who had collected Dr. Scholar's curriculum vitae and drafted a letter of support on behalf of the committee. The committee chair, Susan Jones, also had composed a draft letter of support for the Associate Dean to review and edit.

The Associate Dean addressed the Women in Medicine Group: "I am delighted to recommend Jane Scholar for the award, Susan. She merits selection for her academic achievements and the impressive efforts of her mentoring, both of which have transformed this institution. However, this nomination packet needs to be much stronger.

The instructions for this award state that our nomination will be judged on "thoroughness and completeness of the award package" as well as "the impact of her work." This means that we are still missing at least three items: the required award form, the biography, and cover letter. Of course, the packet would also benefit from additional support letters from any of her protégés, other women leaders, and the Dean.

I really appreciate your sending this nomination letter to me in advance. I've taken the opportunity to review the letter and make a few edits, with comments to explain why I made the edits. Please take a look at the my edits and let me know what you think. Will you gather the supporting materials together while I work on the Dean's letter of support?"

- [Original letter](#) PDF
- [Letter with Dean's edits](#) PDF
- [Final letter \(with edits accepted\)](#) PDF

Tips for Getting Nominated

What can you do to make sure that you are nominated for that desired award or position?

Identify the Award or Position That Interests You and Ask To Be Nominated.

- Once you have identified the desired award or position, don't wait to be asked. Ask a friend, colleague, or peer to nominate you.
- Be conscious of the impression you give. Work to project an image of ability and strength. Be mindful of what you share at work. Don't give anyone a chance to say, however well-meaning, "She has enough on her plate", "Her children are still young" or "Her husband has a big job." If you have to say "no" to

something, thank them for thinking of you, and ask them to consider you for the next opportunity. Give the message that even though you're busy today, this is the kind of opportunity you are looking for—if it is!

Practice Effective Mentorship.

- Identify a mentor from whom you can seek advice. If you don't have a mentor, approach someone you think would be a good mentor, and ask them for advice about awards, promotion, and opportunities. Doing this makes them aware of you and your interests and starts the process of investing them in your success.
- Use your mentor to help you identify your interests and strengths and to understand what is available to you. Sit down with your mentor to refine the plan of action you developed to get the skills necessary to win that award, promotion, or other hidden opportunity. This also provides your mentor with something concrete that THEY can report on when they are asked to account for themselves in their mentorship role.

Increase Your Visibility.

- Talk to, and more importantly, listen to your chair, dean, associate dean, or someone in a leadership role who may be in a position to help you. When you hear them talk about an idea that interests them, offer your help. This tells them something about your ambition, and you will get your name into their consciousness as someone who is looking for opportunities.
- Think of projects as recognition and opportunity, rather than work. Identify projects of interest, and introduce yourself to people involved in these projects. Volunteer. When they need someone for a project, your name will become part of the group of people they think of as "up and coming." It's a lot more fun to invite someone to join a project who will appreciate the invitation.

Make It Easy For Your Colleagues to Nominate You.

- Update your CV before you seek nominations from others. These are usually busy people, so it is important to give them your CV before your nomination slips off their "to do" list. Have your CV prepared in a folder. A folder allows a graceful retreat if they tell you that they don't have time.
- If the first step to getting nominated is drafting a letter, offer to write the first draft and do it right away. Be sure to address the specific goals, with examples, and describe how the person knows you, and why you merit this award, promotion, or position. DON'T BE MODEST—write it the way you would for someone else.

Creating a Successful Nomination Packet

What can you do to create a competitive packet that propels your application to the top of the list?

Follow Directions and Make a Checklist: If you are creating a packet from a list of guidelines, read the directions, carefully. Remember the old saying, "Measure twice, cut once." Follow the directions. If there is no

checklist in the packet, go through the directions and create one, then check off the items as you complete them. Have a trusted friend or colleague review your packet before it is submitted. Doing this will force you to compile all the information into its final format and help you in making sure that all the materials are included in the packet.

All supporting documents in the nomination packet should be geared to what the committee has asked you to submit. Don't send something clearly intended for another use and expect them to glean the information they need to make their decision. The information you include should be the requested content and length, addressed to the correct recipient(s). Submitted materials should be consistent with the application and presented in an orderly fashion.

Put Together a Professional Presentation: A well-presented packet includes just the right amount of information. Make sure that you have addressed goals properly and that content is sufficient. Use 11 or 12 point sans serif font and standard margins. Make sure it is properly formatted with correct spelling and grammar. Use spell check, but don't depend on it. Spell check isn't perfect, and you want to be careful of those common errors that spell check won't catch like "their" for "there". If you use any initials or acronyms, be sure to explain what they are—don't assume that everyone is familiar with the same things as you.

Exceed Expectations: Give yourself enough time to develop a nomination packet that exceeds all the minimum requirements. What does this mean? It means including just the right amount of detail within the content and length requirements so that your narrative is attractive to the committee. Let your story grab the reader—make it creative, innovative, and inspiring! To do this, you might give outcome measures that demonstrate your success, or an interesting example of the concept you are presenting. Sometimes a story makes your point better than reaching for another adjective.

Invite Letters of Support: Invite colleagues, or provide a list of carefully chosen colleagues to the person who is nominating you, to write a letter in support of your nomination. Their names and accomplishments should be recognizable to the selection committee, and relevant to the award or position. They should know you well enough to personalize the letter and provide insightful evidence as to why you should receive the award. They should also be people who are capable of writing a strong letter and likely to write it in time. Be sure to show your appreciation at the time of the invitation and don't forget to let them know when you receive the recognition.

Your job, throughout the process, is to make it as easy as possible for the people whose help you've requested to produce a high quality packet of information. Help those who receive the packet to review and understand the key points that will lead them to see you as the perfect candidate. Making the process streamlined and almost effortless will require organization and work on your part, but making it pleasant for the other people involved will pay off the next time you need something, or the next time an opportunity comes up, even if the first attempt fails.

References

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