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# The Promotion Maze

Coaching the absent-minded professor through the academic promotion process

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**What happens when** a seemingly well-trained, successful adult feels that life is unraveling? This happens to many academics who seek advancement up the college or university ladder. The promotion process, and related challenges, occur in the mid-life stage of adulthood. They've arrived – but need to reach an ever-increasing bar – and they must do this while they juggle complex and competing values, demands and consequences.

Coaching for academics confronting the promotion pro-

cess is a critical but often neglected area of coaching. Promotion up the academic ladder is increasingly time consuming, arduous and frustrating – especially for those faculty who appear as the 'absent-minded professor.' Although bordering on brilliant, many professors have poor executive functioning and suffer from problems involving memory, attention or learning. Although they are smart and skilled, their executive function skills may impede their efforts to meet the multiple roles and responsibilities they face. They

rush, miss meetings or important deadlines, live a life of paper clutter, and fail to live up to their true potential. Some have diagnosed disabilities, but others have shadow or subtle problems that rear their ugly heads when expectations and stress increase.

A faculty member engaged in the promotion process may ask, “How much is enough? Who is my ally or foe? Do I need a mentor? Who will write letters of recommendation? How can I find the time to do it all?” Often overwhelmed, anxious and frustrated, they procrastinate and neglect promotion tasks, spinning their wheels with teaching, research, and/or service responsibilities.

Coaches can help. Currently, some colleges and universities support the use of coaching services for faculty with disabilities. Additionally, some colleges provide a stipend to all faculty so they may access services or resources useful in the promotion process.

Coaches working with faculty negotiating the promotion maze may provide a variety of strategies to enhance executive functioning. In addition to providing support and accountability, the coach discusses memory aids, time management, organization of papers, and project management.

Here are some tips coaches can provide to faculty who are engaged in the promotion process:

**1. Understand the Requirements.** Ensure you have the

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exact timelines and consequences from your department, school, and college. Understand the elements of the promotion package and criteria for promotion. This includes the stated and unstated norms within your college. Schedule appointments with key decision-makers or mentors.

**2. Inquire about available support services.** Ask, “What are resources available to those on the promotion track or with disabilities?” Resources may include stipends to purchase clerical, editorial, or other support services.

**3. Find a Devil’s Advocate.** Contact a trusted, competent, but somewhat harsh and candid person to review your materials and progress. The question to address is timing and

excellence. For example, is it too early to apply? Do papers or publications meet the standards of the school? Notwithstanding your success and strengths, what are vulnerabilities and possible pitfalls?

**4. Focus on the quality, rather than the quantity, of publications.** Take the time to evaluate, and reevaluate, the journals to which you want to submit.

**5. Monitor progress in a systematic manner.** Employ spreadsheets or project management Apps. For example, the app, TRELLO, helps to monitor progress and manage coauthors. Work backwards from the time all materials are to be handed in to the present.

**6. Use positive assertive skills.** Schedule times to define authorship and other roles and responsibilities. Take the risk to request letters of recommendation from those you respect who know your work. Ask if they are willing to support you.

**7. Employ delegation and negotiation skills.** Ensure that you perform only the most critical teaching and service responsibilities while you are preparing your promotion package. Request help from graduate assistants for grading and clerical work. Negotiate when you will apply for new grants.

**8. Keep stress levels down.** Touch base with a counselor, psychologist, social worker or physician if you are highly stressed and/or fatigued, or inclined to repetitive illnesses. If stress and fatigue are high, motivation, self-management and productivity are low.

**9. Delete all but critical tasks and responsibilities.** Do not accept new responsibilities. This includes new – even prestigious – committee, professional organization or community-based positions. Politely but firmly refuse by saying, “I appreciate the opportunity, but the promotion process requires my full attention at this time. Please keep me in mind for the future.”

**10. Focus on wellness.** Schedule time with a family member, colleague, friend or trainer to engage in regular exercise. Even a 30-minute walk three times a week will help. Don’t forget about good nutrition and relaxation. The promotion process requires a long-term commitment, and good health and stamina are necessary for the long haul.

Academics are not the only group of midlife professionals needing coaching. For example, physicians and financial planners are required to periodically recertify or seek additional certifications. They attempt to study, attend courses, and complete applications while carrying on brutal work/life schedules. Coaches can help these and other groups as they continuously seek professional advancement. ●