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Don't be a yes-man

It is a bad career strategy. Promotions go to those who challenge, not those who comply.

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Gunnar Östberg



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If you think promotions come from hard work and compliance, think again. It's the optimistic realist, the one who dares to say no, who actually gets ahead.

In my experience, getting a promotion has little to do with knowledge or capability; it's more about **curiosity, integrity, judgment, and perspective, all viewed in a 3D business spin.**



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Earlier in my career, now more than 25 years ago (help! time flies), I had the opportunity to assist management with several one-man investigations and prove myself capable. The investigations I conducted focused on organization, production processes, technology, marketing, and business models, often in combination with each other.

To explain and prove my story point of not being a yes-man, I'll share anecdotal stories about a few of those investigations. I did many, but here are just five. Although this was a long time ago, the subject remains relevant today.

Get promoted: Take the initiative & challenge the status quo.

The year was 1992. I had been working hard on testing system software for some time, and despite my efforts, nothing had happened with my career, though I was already over 30.

However, with the experience I'd gained, I realized that the company's testing methodology had flaws and was inefficient. As I wanted to address that issue, I asked my manager if I could get time to investigate it. He said, "Yes, why not?", and I spent a few months part-time measuring, studying, interviewing people, questioning, and finding new ways of doing things. I completely overhauled the company's testing methodology and wrote a comprehensive report, two-thirds of which included suggestions for improvements. I was very critical of the production process; I was absolutely not a yes-man. What do you think happened when I took the **initiative** and **challenged** the status quo? I got fired? No. The report was somehow forwarded seven stories up the hierarchy to the CEO, and I received a memo (an electronic letter; we had MEMO instead of email at this time, see Note 1) from him, in which he praised my work and congratulated me on an excellent report. He also CC'd all the managers on the line of command. So, what happened was that I received my first promotion, to Team Leader for a new Methods Team assigned the task of — guess what — fixing all the problems I had identified!

Grow stronger: Show judgment and integrity.

We use Teams, Zoom, and Google Meet today, but back in 1997, I already investigated whether IP video telephony could be used for internal meetings. Management dreamed about this because frequent global air travel was consuming a significant portion of the budget. However, I concluded that the international corporate intranet was too slow for that. Webcams that would work were actually available, a completely new technology at the time. However, my calculations and judgment suggested that the lines were too slow. It would be too risky to pursue. My recommendation was to close this initiative as soon as possible. Through good risk judgment, balanced business realism, and some bravery, I demonstrated **judgment** and **integrity**. I was not the yes-man. I am very pro-tech, but also business-savvy. I know I grew stronger in management's eyes, even though I dashed their hopes.

Create your career: Take on the company interests before yours.

In 1998, I switched from cost rationalization and lead-time improvements to business development. I wanted to work on the revenue side for a change. I joined a service product unit that was developing new markets for emerging service capabilities. I investigated and advised my company against investing in professional services for home communication (e.g., talking refrigerators that buy milk themselves, etc.) and also professional services for installing internet access in buildings. Neither the technology (such as fiber) nor the users nor the company was mature enough for these applications. So, I recommended against both my projects. It was the right decision for the company, although I would have enjoyed continuing with them. I put the **company's interests before my own** — and it temporarily cost me my position. Instead, I investigated other tech markets on my own, particularly mobile technology, which led me to a new and very stimulating career path.

Get references: Combine capability with curiosity and judgment.

In 1999, I explored the integration of maps and GPS into mobile phones. And this was, in fact, a good idea, according to my findings. This was when I was working on services for Wireless Travel Management, a startup where we built a WAP mobile app for booking flights. However, the technology wasn't quite there yet; for example,

there were no mobile phones with large screens or built-in GPS receiver chips, even though they were on the horizon. The project continued with the approach, as recommended by me. It was the right decision, even though active work was on hold in anticipation of the technology. Here, I demonstrated **curiosity** and **judgment**, carefully **valuing opportunities and risks**. I was not a yes-man; I was just an optimistic realist. This was a good reference for me.

Strengthen your cards: Be firm on your correct analysis. Timing and a clear strategy are everything.

Also in 1999, while working for Ericsson, I investigated the business model for Ericsson's part of a proposed internet joint venture that Ericsson, Hewlett-Packard, and Telia were planning to undertake together, based on revolutionary service design and scripting capabilities.

A typical use case was that you could instruct (program, prompt) the digital assistant service to arrange scheduling and booking of services with multiple integrated external service providers, and the digital assistant service would dynamically adapt (reschedule, rebook) as things progressed, taking care of new requests at any time.

They had a clear service vision, jokingly referred to as allnightout.com (in Swedish: helkväll.nu). In this vision service, you'd use the same internet service to plan and book a theater, dining, bar, and nightclub, along with all taxis for the entire party. Then, as we all know, plans can change during the evening, and the digital assistant service can reschedule and rebook services for you. To make this possible, a new scripting language for the internet was needed, one that could easily incorporate business logic and integrate services.

HP had developed a special web programming language for this purpose (web integrations and scheduling). They had an asian team of highly skilled engineers working on it — I think HP had acquired an Indian company. Telia was the operator with the user base. Ericsson was the leading global provider of telecoms technology.

I was involved on Ericsson's side as a secret supervisory body, officially a business developer. After conducting my analysis during the workshops, I rejected the joint venture due to a lack of promising business prospects for Ericsson. I still feel that was the right decision. It would have just cost money without any output at the time,

and Ericsson would not have been able to drive this development. It was the wrong focus, and **didn't align with the decided strategy**.

It was also **too early** — the internet was still in its infancy. This project was at least 25 years ahead of its time. In fact, even today, 25 years later, with all the new AI-agentic technology we have access to, I haven't seen this service anywhere.

At the time, I demonstrated **technical insight** and **foresight**, and it was lucky I persuaded them. There was no joint venture. HP probably closed down its initiative, because I've never heard anything more about it. Telia stepped down its attempts to climb the value chain. Ericsson went on with its basic strategy. You can't jump on every opportunity, even if it sounds great at first. Anyhow, my cards were strengthened, not weakened.

Wrap up

I advised against most of these projects. I have always been honest. I dared to convey messages to senior managers that they didn't want to hear.

Promotions don't go to yes-men. They go to those who care enough to challenge what's wrong and improve what matters.

You should do the same. Seize occasions and opportunities, but value them with care. Stand up. Demonstrate **curiosity, judgment, integrity, and business perspective**.



Image created with ChatGPT

Notes

Note 1. MEMO was used in many large companies from the 1980s to the mid-1990s and was a mainframe-based text messaging system with practical functions for pure text communication. MEMO was developed by Björn Sellgren and had millions of users worldwide. It was replaced by IP-based email, most commonly Microsoft Outlook, which was more modern, but I can't say it was any better.

Note 2. See my [other Medium story](#).

All text written by the author, not AI.

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The above-mentioned 25-year-old service vision is becoming realistic with today's (agentic) AI. If you have seen an "allnightout.com"-type service today, I want to know about it!

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What was your "No-Man" moment?

Share in the comments an example where challenging management's view ultimately strengthened your position.

About the Author



Gunnar Östberg, Business Transformation Architect, CEO, Business Clarity.

Gunnar is an M.Sc. computer engineer with 40 years of experience in **business and IT-driven transformation**. He has worked with global giants like Ericsson and Scania, as well as nimble high-tech firms. Passionate about sound architectural principles and systems thinking, Gunnar writes to expand perspectives and deepen insight. Through his consultancy, Business Clarity, Gunnar helps organizations evolve ideas into sustainable systems and products, transforming their business through structured, principle-based innovation. His focus areas include pragmatic architecture, business modeling, and delivering real impact.

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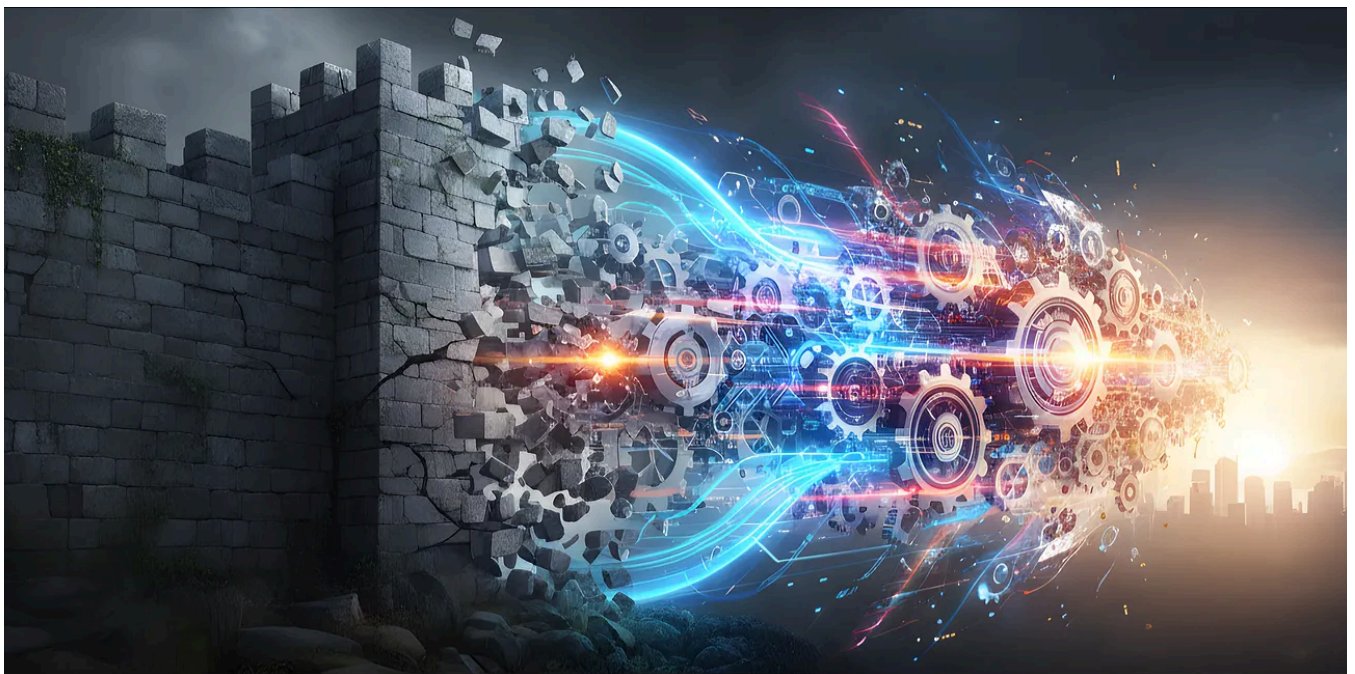
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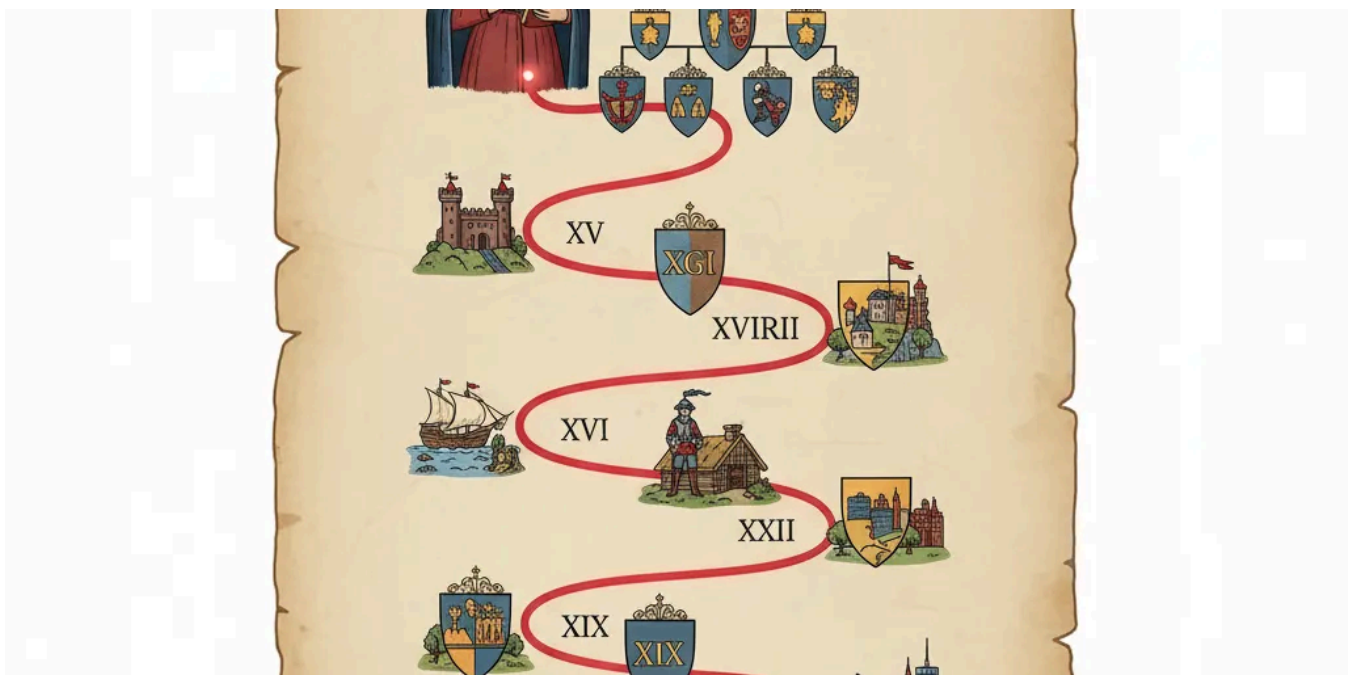
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