Get on the Rocket Ship

Idea In Short

Over-managing a career, worrying constantly about positioning, entitlement and promotion odds, tends to backfire. A blunt piece of advice from one tech executive to another cuts through the noise: when offered a seat on a rocket ship, don't ask which seat, just get on.

The Trap of Over-Management

Some professionals treat their careers like a classical piano recital where a single mistake feels catastrophic, thinking constantly about exactly what role they should be playing, how to position for the next promotion and what they believe they have earned. That level of self-monitoring is exhausting, and it rarely produces the outcome it is chasing.1

Earning Trust Before Demanding It

Anyone new to a firm, team, school or community benefits from checking their own assumptions early. Has the work been consistently good? Has genuine trust actually been earned yet? Patience in the early period, being the kind of new hire worth hiring in the first place, tends to pay off far more reliably than an early push for recognition.

An Individualistic Habit Worth Noticing

Modern professional culture pushes people toward self-focus by design: individual performance rankings in school, individual rather than team-based performance reviews and a labor market that rewards frequent job switching all train people to talk about themselves constantly, framing every interaction as personal positioning. Recognizing that pull is the first step toward resisting it.

Remember This Is Client Service

Refocusing on the actual project, and what the client is genuinely paying to get accomplished, cuts through most of the self-comparison noise. Constantly benchmarking against peers and obsessing over year-end review timing is largely unproductive, since promotion outcomes depend heavily on factors like manager quality that sit mostly outside individual control. A string of a few difficult managers in a row can derail even strong performance, regardless of effort.

Three Practical Habits

Doing consistently good work comes first, building the kind of relational credibility that comes from being genuinely helpful, reliable and pleasant to work with. Finding an organization that is actually growing comes second, since working somewhere stagnant tends to create a fixed-pie mentality, where colleagues compete defensively for a shrinking set of opportunities rather than growing the pie together, a dynamic that often shows up as people saving emails as evidence against each other. Getting onboard without excessive self-positioning comes third: taking staffing direction from project leadership without becoming high-maintenance about personal preferences.

The Rocket Ship Story

A well-known executive once described being interviewed for a role that, by her own criteria, checked none of the boxes she had listed. The hiring executive's response became a piece of enduring career advice: don't be an idiot, get on a rocket ship. When a company is growing rapidly and genuinely having impact, careers tend to take care of themselves; when growth stalls or the mission stops mattering, stagnation and internal politics tend to fill the vacuum instead.2

A Caveat Worth Naming

None of this means abandoning all judgment about a role's fit; a genuinely poor cultural match or an ethically troubling business deserves real scrutiny even inside a fast-growing company. The advice to get on the rocket ship assumes a baseline of reasonable fit and integrity, not a blank check to override every other consideration purely because growth numbers look impressive on paper. A company can be growing quickly and still be the wrong place for a particular person, and distinguishing genuine misfit from ordinary early-tenure discomfort is worth taking seriously before walking away.

Recognizing a Rocket Ship Before It Launches

Spotting real growth momentum before it becomes obvious to everyone else is its own skill worth developing. Signals worth watching include a company genuinely struggling to hire fast enough to keep up with demand, leadership consistently reinvesting profit back into the business rather than paying it out, and a customer base that keeps expanding faster than the sales team can comfortably manage. None of these signals guarantees continued growth, but together they distinguish a company plausibly on the way up from one merely claiming to be, which matters enormously when deciding where to spend the next several years.

Don't Be an Idiot

The blunt phrasing sticks precisely because it cuts through so much of the over-analysis described earlier. Offered a genuine seat on a rocket ship, the productive response is not negotiating for a specific seat; it is getting on, doing excellent work and letting the growth carry the career along with it, trusting that a rising organization creates more opportunity along the way than any amount of careful pre-negotiation ever could.3

- 1Career
- 2Sheryl Sandberg
- 3Startup Company

Summary

Careers mostly take care of themselves inside fast-growing organizations; stagnation and politics creep in when growth stalls. Do good work, find a company genuinely on the way up, get onboard without excessive self-positioning, and don't be an idiot about turning down a rocket ship.