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How To Speak So Your Boss Will Listen

Five guidelines on how to effectively communicate with your boss

by Beverly Y. Langford

February 26, 2009

Many talented professionals struggle with how to effectively communicate with their bosses, without appearing to be presumptuous, self-serving, or manipulative. You may be forthright and assertive with coworkers or direct reports, but when it comes to communicating up the organization, you may doubt that you are doing the best job of selling your ideas - and yourself - to the higher-ups.

Most managers value employees who are able to master the art of upward communication, and those people are the ones who come to mind when opportunities arise. Communicating effectively with your manager requires that you combine assertiveness and respect, clarity and flexibility, the ability to articulate and the ability to listen.

Here are some guidelines for getting your boss' attention and achieving the rewards that result from developing this critical skill.



Be Prepared

Coming to your manager with a brainstorm that just popped into your head is a recipe for rejection. Curb your enthusiasm until you get the facts, both the pros and cons, find concrete examples to support your premise, and organize your message into a logical, well-developed presentation. As author Eric Garner in his article, *The 7 Rules of Upward Communication*, says, "you may undermine your credibility if you have to go away and get more information."

On another note, if you are bringing a problem to your manager because you need his or her help, make sure that you have made every effort to resolve it yourself, and be prepared to report on what you have done so far.

Finally, always make efficient use of your manager's time. Your issues are only one of many the boss is addressing.

Put Your Message In The Right Perspective

Link your ideas to the goals and concerns of both your manager and the company at large. Before you meet with your manager, identify ways that your proposal can benefit others. Know what particular concerns are on your boss's mind-cutting costs, improving morale, or increasing sales. Focus your creativity in areas that will solve some of her problems.

Find out how other companies are handling similar situations, and have some solutions in mind. Managers appreciate options and usually want to be part of the decision process. Even if you think you know the answer, don't stop there. Bring a couple of other possibilities, and lay them all out for your manager to consider.

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Be Prepared To Answer Questions

If you are proposing a new initiative or making your manager aware of a problem, make sure that you anticipate any questions he or she may ask. Pay attention to your manager's communication style. Does he look at things from a global perspective? Does she want to know your thought processes or how you have arrived to your recommendation? Does your manager like details and expect you to come with I's dotted and T's crossed or expect your idea to be a work in progress? Have you spoken with anyone else or garnered advice from others in the company? Are you certain that your idea doesn't duplicate or conflict with other initiatives currently in process?

Also, don't interpret your manager's questions as a lack of trust in your judgment or a prelude to refusal. Avoid getting defensive, and welcome the scrutiny. If you can answer the questions with poise and competence, you will solidify your chances for acceptance.

Bring It With Confidence

Deborah Tannen, in her article *The Power of Talk: Who Gets Heard and Why*, reports that the CEO of a major corporation says that he will decide in five minutes about issues that someone may have been working on for five months. If the person proposing the initiative seems confident, the CEO usually approves it. If not, he rejects it. This approach may seem extreme, but it attests to the fact that you can't separate the message from the messenger. If you don't believe in your idea, why do you expect others to buy in?

Confidence comes from being thoroughly prepared and knowing that you have the ability to turn your concepts into reality. However, most of the executives whom I have interviewed warn that confidence shouldn't cross the line into arrogance. Always be willing to listen and to learn.

Obviously, every idea won't receive a big thumbs-up. If your manager says no, be gracious and appreciative of the fact that your boss listened to your request. Find out, without being defensive, why you didn't get the approval you desired, and, if appropriate, ask what you should differently. If done correctly, the process will strengthen your long-term relationship with your manager and increase the chance of success for future proposals. Further, your strengthened relationship will yield benefits in ways the you may not anticipate today.

Keep Your Manager In The Loop

Once you get your manager's approval, don't disappear while you are working on the project. Bosses hate nasty surprises, such as finding out after the fact that you went over budget or over someone's head to get the job done. Give your manager progress reports along the way, and make sure that you take his or her advice to heart. The feedback that you incorporate may be the difference in success and failure. And further, you will get more buy-in about the finished product.

The ability to communicate effectively to those above you in an organization can be the talent that sets you apart. When you build a reputation for success in this area, you will give you and your message a decided advantage.

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Paula Bradley March 2, 2009, 8:20 pm

Great Advice in preparing a staement to the Director of Human Resource. I wanted to stand up for my associate whom I felt received unfair treatment from my immediate Manager. I wanted to be fair as well as showed my potential to be consider for future promotions from Supervisor to Front Office Manager. This column help me put my thoughts in proper perspective.

Janet February 27, 2009, 2:27 pm

Nice idea...this is a great topic.



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