
How to Find out What's Really in Your Boss's Head

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With the economy in shambles, many of you are worried about keeping your job and making sure that you're not laid off or terminated. One of the ways to make sure you keep your job now is to be able to read your boss's mind. We'll cover other "keep your job now" tips in future newsletters.

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Sometimes you have to become a bit of a stalker with your boss. Of course, if her office is in another building, state, or, heaven forbid, country, you'll have a big problem with this. But if you're lucky enough to be in the same building as your boss, try to carefully and unobtrusively spend some time walking by her office. Befriend her assistant if you can, find out what hours she keeps, where she works out, where she gets her coffee. Running into her coming and going allows you to strengthen your relationship through casual conversation and work up to the difficult issues.

I once asked a well-known hotel executive how he found out what his notoriously difficult boss was really thinking, and he responded that he went to his boss's boss and asked him: What's my boss thinking about Y? This requires, of course, an existing and good relationship with your boss's boss, but some people

through happenstance or personality fit tend to have a better relationship with someone higher up than they do with their immediate boss. If you try this tactic, be sure to include it as a casual aside, instead of something crucial, to avoid creating impossible political fallout with your own boss thinking you're doing an end-run.

What Your Boss Would Say if She Could

You may think that you have it tough these days: doing more with less, working longer hours, fewer medical and other benefits, and less direction and opportunity—but you might be surprised to learn that your boss has even more stressful problems. You may think that she is the source of your stress, but most likely, she's squeezed between her own individual work and supervising more employees. Most managers have tighter budgets and fewer people available to get things accomplished. Many organizations have cut staffs and budgets again and again, leaving mid-level managers caught in the cross-fire, trying to accomplish more with less. Sure, there are incompetent, unfriendly, and just-plain-evil bosses out there, but the majority of middle managers are reasonable people who are trying to do the best they can for the employees they supervise *and* the higher-ups. What would most bosses say if they could speak freely to you? Based on my surveys of my clients, most of them would give you some version of the following:

“Don’t take things personally. When I ignore you or seem distracted or uninterested in what you have to say, it’s not that your great ideas don’t interest me. If I act dismissive or corporate, it may be that I just don’t want to admit that I don’t have the money or the authority to say yes very often in the current environment.” A good question when this happens is to ask, “Is this topic uncomfortable for you?” That might throw your manager off enough for him or her to open up and tell you the real problem.

“I wish you would fight most of your own battles. I know that you expect your boss to help you when your benefit reimbursement is messed up again by accounting or when your administrative assistant is out sick again, but I have my own battles to fight. Don’t always expect me to march into accounting or HR to straighten things out for you. Let things go sometimes or try to fix things yourself.”

“Don’t put me in the middle of your spats with coworkers. I know that both of you want the trip to San Francisco or the cubicle with the window, but if I get in the middle, someone’s going to be mad at me. Try to work it out yourself if at all possible and I will be grateful that you did. I’ll be even more excited if you manage all this on your own without even telling me. If you can do this, when the big issues come down the pike, I’ll have more energy to help you out.”

“I don’t want to have to monitor your every move, so don’t give me a reason to. Most bosses would be willing to give you some flexibility about time and hours, as long as you do your job and get your work done. I’d give you some flexibility to come in later or leave early as long as you do your work well and don’t disappear when you know we have a crunch coming up. I can give you some slack if you manage your own workload, but not if you take advantage of my flexibility. If you do, I’ll have to start watching your every move and I loathe acting like the office hall monitor.”

“You know more about your work than I do and you always will. Help me out when we talk by telling me what you’re working on and why. If you’re confused about priorities, ask me for some guidance but don’t fume silently. A written list of what you’re working on before we meet would be great also, that way I don’t have to panic trying to figure out what you’re talking about and why.”

“If I’ve messed up, let me know in a diplomatic way. Don’t sulk without telling me why. I can’t read minds, and I have a lot crowding out your concerns in my own mind right now. I may miss signals that you think are obvious. If you’re pissed, please just tell me when we’re not in the middle of some other crises. I’ll try to do my best to listen and not get defensive.”

“I don’t like surprises—especially bad news. Let me know as far in advance as possible when you know something is not working. Almost everything can be fixed, if you let me know soon enough. Don’t assume that I won’t find out; I almost always will.”

“Let me know before things blow up. If you notice something about my management style that’s really damaging to you or your coworkers, please tell me. If you notice that I always ignore Susan in meetings, give me a hint that’s happening.”

“Don’t mess up on the obvious things. I can save you from small mistakes but if you throw-up in the CEOs lap at the holiday party, e-mail sexual jokes around the office, or falsify your expense reports, you’re on your own.”

Your boss may not be able to speak candidly to you, but if she could, you can be sure that she would say some version of the above.