How to Read Your Boss's Mind

With work-at-home options, travel, and endless meetings jamming bosses' calendars, finding out what a boss thinks or wants requires detective work. No longer can many a hapless employee expect to be told what to do with a detailed list and expert follow-up. More often, you're required to just know or figure it out for yourself and expect to pay for any mistakes.

Anticipate Your Boss's Needs

Staying on top of what your boss wants and needs requires you to initiate the tough questions. You can't wait for her to tell you what to do, or to even know what you're working on. Instead, you need to be sure that you tell her what you're doing and find out what she wants before she wants it. Perhaps send her a weekly email listing current projects as well as completed items or hand her a memo when you meet with her. Trust me, you know more about your job and you always will. Don't assume that she has the time to know what you're up to.

Ask The Right Question

When you actually get a chance to talk to your boss: ask the right question at the right time. Ideally, you need to set up regular meetings with your boss before you need them. Should your boss be the one to initiate these meetings? Yes, of course, but ideal bosses are few and far between. You have to take the lead. Skillfully stalk your boss in order to find out when he arrives, where he gets his coffee fix, befriend his assistant, or do whatever it takes to get on his calendar, as well as having more casual conversations. In these meetings, ask questions such as:

- What did you think the strengths and weaknesses were of the XYZ report I just turned in?
- What's most useful about the work I've been doing for you?
- What's least useful?
- How can I help you meet your goals better?
- What do you know about the workload between now and the end of the year?
- What do you see as the pros and cons of the upcoming merger?

If you're in the habit of asking these kinds of questions, your boss won't be surprised when you have to ask tougher questions.

For more ideas about this topic, see my book, We Need to Talk: Tough Conversations With Your Boss -- From Promotions to Resignations, Tackle Any Topic With Sensitivity and Smarts.

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Lynne Eisaguirre
Workplaces That Work
3985 Wonderland Hill Avenue, Suite 106
Boulder, Colorado 80304
303-216-1020
lynne@workplacethatwork.com
www.workplacethatwork.com

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Workplaces That Work | 3985 Wonderland Hill Avenue | Suite 106 | Boulder | CO | 80304