

The Deblieux Report

January 2016

THE BOSS RELATIONSHIP

MANAGERS THINK ABOUT WHAT THEY EXPECT FROM THEIR DIRECT REPORTS. EFFECTIVE MANAGERS THINK ABOUT WHAT THEIR BOSS EXPECTS FROM THEM.

Your relationship with your boss is critical to your success as a manager. If she hired you, she had high hopes for you from the beginning. She assumed you would meet or exceed her expectations. She expected you to grow and prosper under her leadership.

If she inherited you through a reorganization or a new assignment, she wondered from the beginning about you and your potential. She worried about how much baggage you brought with you. She hoped you would use your past experiences to move forward, not to cling to what you had before you started working for her.

YOU CANNOT AFFORD TO TAKE YOUR BOSS' EXPECTATIONS FOR GRANTED.

You may have discussed them. Chances are, you have not. You should review them regularly. They should be the only item on the agenda for a periodic meeting between you and your boss. You

should come to the meeting with questions. You should listen carefully to the answers. It is your job to be the listener and the learner. You should treasure the opportunity.

At the end of the meeting, you need to hold your phone on your selfie stick in front of you. You need to ask yourself some tough questions. You need to ask if you are meeting your boss' expectations. You need to ask if you fully support her agenda and whether you are comfortable working under her leadership. You need to decide if you are "all in" or if you need to update your resume.

These are tough words. Successful managers do not flinch at them. They understand that their success depends on their boss' success. They know that they cannot succeed unless they are fully invested in helping their boss succeed.

Let's look at five questions for your next meeting with your boss about your relationship with your boss:

QUESTION ONE: ON A SCALE OF 1-10, HOW WELL DO I SUPPORT YOUR INITIATIVES?

If your boss wants anything, she wants you to support what she is trying to accomplish. It does

not matter if you think you are supporting her. It does matter if she thinks you are supporting her. You need to know what she thinks.

Your boss is not likely to rate you as a complete disaster or an overwhelming success. She does not think that way. She weighs you (constantly) in terms of your strengths and weaknesses. Asking her to rate you on a scale lets her tell you how her math works for you.

You have to be ready for the answer. It might be a ten. It is more likely a seven or a five. If it is, you have an incredible opportunity to learn, to grow, to reinvigorate. You start this journey by asking a follow-up question – “*What two or three things do you think I could focus on to improve my score by one or two points?*” Listen carefully. Take a few notes. Most of all, show your appreciation for an honest moment of feedback from the person who holds your paycheck in her hand.

QUESTION TWO: WHAT WOULD MAKE ME A MORE EFFECTIVE MEMBER OF YOUR TEAM?

Unless you are your boss' only direct report, you are part of his leadership team. He needs you to, rather, he expects you to, “play well” with his other direct reports. His definition of “play well” is critical to your success. You cannot succeed if he thinks you are doing any less than “very well” in working with his other direct reports. You have to know how he defines “very well.”

Again, you have to be ready for the answer. This is not the place to defend yourself. It is not the place to blame others for not playing well in the sandbox. It is the place to learn what you can do to help and support your colleagues; and thus support your boss' mission and objectives. Before you ask this question, you need to develop a list of follow-up questions to help you plan specific steps you can take to help your boss see you as a strong team player.

QUESTION THREE: ARE YOU COMFORTABLE WITH THE WAY I KEEP YOU INFORMED?

You might call it micromanagement. Your boss calls it common sense. She cannot succeed at her job if she does not know what you and your team are doing. Without a doubt, you think you do a good job of keeping her informed. You need to know if she shares your assessment. You cannot succeed if you do not know for sure.

This question gives you a chance to find out if your boss thinks you come to meetings prepared. It lets you learn about the quality of your written reports and the value of your e-mails. It helps you understand if your boss looks forward to seeing you or prefers to avoid you.

This question, more than the others, is likely to bring out your defenses. Keep them at bay. The answer is not about you. It is about the effectiveness of your internal marketing program. In this context, your boss is your customer; for purposes of this discussion, your only customer. You need to know if your communication style, your communication technique, your communication frequency meets the needs of your most important customer.

QUESTION FOUR: WHAT IS MY SCORE WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH?

This ... is a scary question. But what the heck. If you make it this far, you are a ten on a ten-point vulnerability scale. This may seem like a strange question, but you need to know the answer to it. You need to know if your boss thinks you are on her side, have her back, when the chips are down.

You may think you are dependable. You may, in fact, be dependable. The truth is you do not know if you are dependable in the eyes of your boss. Your boss does not measure your dependability when things are going well. She measures your dependability when profits are down, productivity is suffering, and deadlines are looming.

The answer to this question tells you if your boss thinks you stay when you need to stay; if you are available when you need to be available. More importantly, it tells you if she thinks you take responsibility for yourself and your team; if you anticipate problems, and offer innovative, creative solutions.

You may not want to ask this question. You may not want to hear the answer. You cannot succeed without asking it and knowing the answer to it.

QUESTION FIVE: WHAT DO YOU THINK I NEED TO DO TO REMAIN RELEVANT AND PREPARE MYSELF FOR THE FUTURE?

Every boss wants ... no, expects ... to be surrounded by people who are up to date and prepared to rush headlong into an uncertain future. Simply put, your boss does not need you if you are out of date. He does not need you if you are short on ideas, stuck in the past, or holding on for retirement. He not only does not need you, he is secretly hoping you will go away.

This question, like the other four, comes with a responsibility to listen with an open mind. You are busy. You work hard. You have precious time to yourself already. The answer may require reading, networking, studying, or getting involved in other aspects of the business to expand your horizons. You may already be on track, but you will not know unless you ask and listen.

AS WITH ANY FEEDBACK, YOU HAVE TO DECIDE IF IT APPLIES TO YOU.

These questions will not guarantee your success. They will provide valuable insights into what your boss sees in you and expects from you. The fact is that effective managers have an on-going “selfie stick” view of their effectiveness. They pay attention to the view. They dig for the nuances that tell them what they do right and what they can do better. They are not paranoid about getting better, but they are marginally obsessed by it. They constantly ask, “*What can I do to be more*

effective in my role as a workplace leader?” They recognize that part of that answer lies in understanding how their own boss perceives them. They consider any ounce of feedback they can get from their boss to be gold. They use it to reach new levels of success.

You may not like the answers. You may decide that your boss has no credibility. If that happens, you have to ask if you are where you need to be in your career. Only you can answer that question. Only you can decide what to do with the answer.

THESE QUESTIONS GROW OUT OF MY EXPERIENCE WORKING WITH A BOSS WHO IS STRUGGLING WITH THE STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF A DIRECT REPORT WITH WORKPLACE LEADER RESPONSIBILITIES.

In every case, the boss tells me the answers to these questions before he or she asks me to meet with their direct report. In nearly every case, the direct report is surprised by the answers. They wonder why they have not heard them before our meeting. The honest answer is the boss struggled to find the right time and the right words until things got serious. The direct report struggled to find the right time and the right words to ask for fear of hearing answers they did not want to hear.

These questions give you and your boss an excuse to stop procrastinating about the most important thing between you – your working relationship. If you use them, and add a few of your own, you will have an open dialogue about what your boss expects you to do to be a dynamic member of her team. You will be a better manager to your own team.

Mike Deblieux, SHRM-SCP
mike@deblieux.com • 714.293.9156