

If your boss lacks your expertise, you'll have to become her teacher

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"I lead a technical team which has struggled—for a variety of well-documented reasons—to meet its goals this year. But now I'm facing a performance appraisal by a relatively new boss. In the few months she has been with us, I have worked hard to try to build a relationship with her, keeping her in the loop on the team's progress, doing my best to explain some of the issues. But as I deal with this appraisal, I can't get past the fact that she is not in my field and frankly does not understand all the technical issues my team has run up against this year. I am worried that she will use the appraisal to attack me for problems that were out of my control. What can I do to manage this situation better going forward?"

This is a very, very frustrating situation for people with strong technical skills who have worked hard to build their knowledge base, motivate an overworked staff and manage complex projects. You're thinking, "How can my boss, who is untrained in this field, possibly understand and appreciate everything it takes to do this job?"

But that doesn't mean he or she can't learn, says Bruce Tulgan, founder and chairman of a management consulting firm, RainmakerThinking.com, and author of a book called "It's Okay to Be the Boss: The Step-by-Step Guide to Becoming the Manager Your Employees Need." Your boss doesn't have to be an expert in the work you are doing. But you do have to teach your boss enough to understand what you are doing.

This situation puts you in the potentially awkward and uncomfortable position of becoming a teacher to your boss. The trick is for you to explain your work and your people's work well enough so that your boss gradually develops more respect for what you and they accomplish.

This requires some skills in communications and conversation, including being transparent about what you're doing without being condescending. But it's also important to learn your manager's communication style, says workplace writer Lisa Quast in Forbes magazine.

"How does your manager prefer to interact? Do they want weekly, bi-weekly or monthly updates? Do they prefer written reports with lots of details or brief summaries with only highlights? Does he/she want to meet in person or receive email updates and then follow up with you on any questions they might have? Adapt your communication style to best fit your manager's," she writes.

When you're talking with her, it's important to focus more on outcomes than technical details, Tulgan says. "Help your boss do the homework so that she can ask you probing questions during your management conversations and make sure you are on the right track to meeting those expectations.



"Keep her informed and focused on outcomes: 'This is where we are now. This is how long it took to get here. This is what I am going to do next. This is why. This is how long it should take. This is what we should have at the end of this stage,' then document the basics of these conversations," he says.

Think about ways to help your boss monitor your work, Tulgan says. One strategy, for example, is to provide drafts or samples of your work in progress on a regular basis. "Don't wait until a routine review of the work comes along. By then you might discover that something has been wrong for quite some time. Even if you have a clear deliverable with a concrete deadline, don't wait until you deliver the final product to find out if the deliverable meets the expectations.

"Instead, check with your boss early on to make sure that you are going in the right direction. That means actually showing the boss drafts or samples of what you are doing, not just describing it. Say, 'This is an example of the product we are building,'" he says. "You are much better off having that conversation early and often so that by the time the deadline rolls around for the final deliverable, there will be no surprises."

Another idea: Invite her to participate or observe something that your team is doing. That will provide a lot more clarity than batches of written reports, Tulgan says.

Consider using self-monitoring tools. In situations like this, project plans, checklists and activity logs can be good friends if your boss seems to like them. "Make notes, use checklists and report on them at regular intervals," he says.

Another thought: Spread the word. "Ask customers, vendors, co-workers and everyone else you work with to give you honest feedback about your performance in relation to them," he says. "When you receive written feedback, consider passing their responses on to your boss."

See if you can contribute to the hearsay about your work. If people are saying good things, make sure she knows. "One of the most consistent sources of information most bosses have about the work of their employees is hearsay. People talk. Word spreads," he says.

So the lesson here is more communication with a difficult boss, not less, even though it's a lot more work for you.

"It's OK that your boss doesn't know or understand everything you may be doing," Tulgan says. "But it's not OK for your boss to remain totally in the dark."

Managers at Work is a monthly column exploring the issues and challenges facing managers. Contact Kathleen Driscoll with questions or comments by phone at (585) 249-9295 or by email at kadriscoll@aol.com.

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