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Talking to your boss

Your normally good relationship with your supervisor recently encountered some turbulence. Maybe you feel like you're not being treated fairly. Or perhaps she said something that hurt your feelings. What to do now?



Rick Brimeyer

Like any relationship, it's important to talk about it ... and relatively soon. Just like cracks in concrete never get smaller, so rifts in relationships should be promptly "seal-coated" so they don't expand.

Waiting is valuable, however, if the episode is still so raw that your emotions won't allow you to have an objective discussion. If that's the case, it's probably a good idea to sleep on it. Take advantage of the time away from work to discuss the situation with a trusted friend who can be objective and help calibrate your reaction ... someone who cares about you enough to tell you what you need to hear, not what you want to hear.

It's a good idea to schedule a meeting with your supervisor rather than drop in unannounced. In addition to being a sign of respect, this increases the chances that you will have their full attention. If you're uncomfortable sharing the topic in the meeting invitation, use a generic topic such as "1-on-1 Discussion" or "Clarification Requested."

It is helpful to go into the discussion with the following assumptions:

- My supervisor cares about me.
- They want to do the right thing.
- My supervisor has information and challenges that I am not aware of.

These assumptions are valid the vast majority of the time, especially if you have established a history of working well together. By entering the conversation with these assumptions, you set the stage for collaborative problem solving rather than finger pointing.

You may even want to start the discussion by stating your assumptions. From there you can transition to the topic which is causing the turmoil and the apparent disconnect with your assumptions.

"I think you really care about me and I assume you are under a lot of stress to meet our schedule. But yesterday when you told the entire team that everyone had to work

overtime because I was behind, it made me feel like you were tossing me under the bus ... especially since we both know the reason for the delay was outside of my control."

When introducing the topic, stick to facts and observed behaviors. It's also perfectly acceptable to share your feelings so long as they are genuine.

"You assigned me to work on the Crap-o-nator seven times during the past month which is three more times than anyone else. That makes me feel like assignments aren't fairly distributed or that you're mad at me about something."

It's not OK to make accusations regarding the potential motivation behind the behaviors.

"You assigned me to work on the Crap-o-nator a bunch more times than anyone else. You're playing favorites!"

After introducing the topic and your feelings it's best to really listen so that you can understand the boss's point of view. Perhaps another team member requires special scheduling to help them through a personal crisis. Perhaps they put together the new schedule at a location where they didn't have access to prior schedule history. Maybe the supervisor just blew it. If so, and they apologize, graciously accept it and move on.

It's OK to ask questions to understand

the situation. The goal is to reach a common understanding of the issue and work towards a solution that is acceptable for everyone. Realize there will be times when supervisors cannot divulge certain information without betraying a confidentiality or even violating a legal obligation.

Especially with more complex issues, it's a good idea to summarize the main points at the conclusion of the discussion to make sure you're both on the same page. Also, assuming the issue has been resolved to your satisfaction, thank the supervisor for their valuable time and attention.

According to Executive Coach Rex Gatto, it is the failure to come to agreement, and not necessarily conflict, that causes problems within a team. By promptly and professionally handling disagreements with your supervisor, you not only strengthen your work environment overall, but gain the respect of most bosses.

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