

What You Can Do When Your Boss Is Unresponsive

Either teach him to communicate or seek support elsewhere

BY TAUNEE BESSON

Editor's Note: This month columnist Taunee Besson answers questions about common job hunting and career problems. If you have a question about your job search or career, send it to our monthly advice column, National Business Employment Weekly, Box 300, Princeton, N.J. 08543-0300. All names are kept confidential.

Question: For the past three years, I've worked for a manager who is a brilliant technician with no people skills. While I admire Dave's technical expertise, his lack of communication is a real problem. Example: In the past month I have devoted my time almost exclusively to a "hot" project he said was highest priority. I turned it in about a week ago and haven't heard a word since. Has he read it? Is he pleased or disappointed? Wasn't it important after all? How does his boss feel about it? What's the next step? Instead of moving on to another assignment, I'm still looking for closure on this one. When I asked for feedback he said, "Right, we'll have to get together on this," but so far there's been no meeting scheduled.

While I've enjoyed the fast-paced, sink-or-swim environment Dave's management style requires, I'd prefer to work with someone who can be a mentor, or at least be available for consultation. As it's unlikely my boss will change, how can I find a manager, preferably within my company, who will be more accessible when I need him and give me feedback on my performance?

Answer: A noncommunicative manager can be a real problem, but not an insurmountable one. Before you write him off, see if you can train him to give the feedback you need.

While part of any supervisor's job description includes effective communication with his staff, managers are rarely promoted because of their people skills. Technical expertise and seniority often are the main selection criteria. Consequently, many managers are superb in dealing with complicated tasks and mediocre or poor in day-to-day interaction.

Typically, professionals who have little communication with their bosses tend to think the worst. They wonder why their manager is avoiding them.

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Perhaps lurking in the back of your mind is a concern that Dave hates your report and is too perturbed to discuss it. Catastrophic expectations run rampant in a communication void.

While Dave may be unhappy with your work and reluctant to confront you, that's probably not the case. While managers with poor people skills avoid unpleasant conversation, they're equally uncomfortable offering praise. As a result, their subordinates often feel puzzled about where they stand.

It's natural to assume that our colleague's priorities match our own, especially when we're told, "This is a hot project." However, Dave is probably involved with a variety of hot projects and yours has likely become lukewarm compared to others. He

Technical expertise and seniority—not people skills—often are the main criteria for promotions

may think that since you've completed your report on time, the project is a "done deal" and he can concentrate on more important matters. He doesn't understand your need for closure.

You're probably right that Dave won't change on his own, because he doesn't have the inherent skill or insight. But he can improve his communication style with some diplomatic but persistent coaching from you.

The key to modifying his behavior (and yours) lies in asking for what you want. If he doesn't know what you want, how can he give it to you? By taking responsibility for initiating contact with him you will get his attention and feedback and polish your communication skills in the process.

Let's examine some possible solutions for your problem, as well as some long-term strategies for improving your relationship with him and other managers (should Dave be a hopeless cause).

● Realize that you will have to force your manager to make an appointment to discuss your project. You're entitled to his attention, so don't feel embarrassed or pushy about asking for it. Walk into his office, calendar in hand, and request a specific time when you can get together. Mark it on your calendar and suggest he do the same.

- Tell him why it's important for both you and the department to have closure on this issue. He may be amazed that you need this meeting, but should understand if you spell it out.
- Give him a list of questions in advance you want to discuss so he'll have some time to prepare answers. Let him know that you really look forward to talking over the project results.
- Prepare an agenda for your meeting. Include the questions you gave him as well as some observations and insights you've gleaned from your research. Have several options in mind for where to go from here.
- If Dave seems a little perplexed about how to conduct the meeting, help him by following your agenda. If he has one of his own, run with it, but be sure to cover your important points as well.
- Ask for both positive and negative feedback. Don't be content with, "Your report is good." Find out specifics. What's good about it? What can be improved?
- Be sure to thank Dave for his time and reiterate the advantages of your discussing the report. Verbal reinforcement should help him see why a project debriefing is essential.

Now that you have some momentum in your relationship, build on it. Suggest to Dave that he hold weekly or bi-weekly staff meetings to discuss on-going projects, new developments, departmental problems and ideas for solving them. Tell him these get-togethers can be short and informal, yet effective in keeping everyone informed. It may be wise to advance this idea with a couple of key colleagues to enlist their support. They're probably equally frustrated with Dave's unavailability and will enthusiastically back you.

Also schedule a once-a-month talk about your work in particular. If you already have staff meetings, many of your questions and concerns will be addressed there, but you should set aside time alone with Dave, too. These meetings can cover issues not pertinent to the whole department, as well as priorities, goals and problems related to your specific projects.

Ask for an annual performance appraisal. Find out Dave's views on how you're handling your job. Discuss what you're doing well and what you need to improve. Also, formulate some long-term goals for your position and, if possible, your career. Talk about ways to expand your expertise, courses to take, skills to learn and people to meet. While Dave

Continued on Next Page

Improving communication

Cont. from Preceding Page

may be uncomfortable with this discussion, it's important for both of your careers. You need the information to move forward, and he needs the practice to hone his management skills.

If he follows your lead and institutes similar meetings with others in his department, your initiative can reap benefits for all of your colleagues. Even if he doesn't, you will have learned how to ask for what you want.

If Dave continues to be uncommunicative and distant, it's time to activate Plan B. (Actually, pursuing plans A and B simultaneously is an even better idea.) Instead of concentrating solely on reforming Dave, develop opportunities beyond his circle of influence. There are many ways to extend your visibility within your company, industry and career field. Here are some of them:

- Work on as many projects as possible involving other departments. In technical fields, reports often require input from several areas. Meet with colleagues in other parts of the company and try to win their respect. Then if you want a transfer, they'll be eager to help.

- If there's an interdepartmental task force operating to improve quality control, develop a new product, put an advanced computer system on line, etc., volunteer to serve on it. Working together toward a common goal is a great way to meet and make friends with people throughout the company.

The key to modifying your boss's behavior is asking for what you want

- Play on the firm's softball team. Volunteer for its charitable projects. Join one of its wellness classes.
- Attend in-house training programs and make an effort to get to know your fellow participants.
- Ask acquaintances from other departments out to lunch at least twice a month. Find out what they're doing and whether their work is similar to yours.

- If you uncover an exciting new area, consider taking a course or two to increase your expertise. Along with valuable information, you'll also meet people who are currently in that field.
- Join a professional organization. Companies often have chapters in-house. If not, you'll probably find one in your city.
- Cultivate your relationship with Dave's manager. That person has the power to make your career goals a reality. Look for opportunities to present reports or represent your department to him or her whenever possible. But be sure you have Dave's blessing. Otherwise he may resent your initiative.
- Talk to Personnel about your desire to know the company better. Ask them for managers who would be good to "information interview." (This one may be a little risky if you do it without Dave's knowledge or with a loose-lipped human resources staff person.)

People who take the initiative for going after what they want usually find a mentor in the process. Yet because they develop exceptional skill in building relationships and networks, they often don't need one. By expanding your people skills, you help yourself and your colleagues and decrease your dependence on others. Enlightened self-reliance beats finding a mentor any day. ●