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Help Your Boss Help You

Convert Conflict Into Opportunities

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Help Your Boss Help You

Convert Conflict Into Opportunities

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For Cheri, Mem, and Josh

Giving Good-Enough Answers

The key to good-enough answers is the following statement:

A good-enough answer today is much, much better than a great answer next week.

This is hard for professionals to believe because they're so accustomed to giving correct answers that solve problems. A good-enough answer doesn't satisfy that criterion. Worse, it might even be wrong, and nobody wants to be wrong to their manager. But being able to quickly provide good-enough answers helps you and your career, because it not only addresses the problem and thereby removes it from your list of tasks, it also relieves the questioner's frustration of waiting for a reply.

Because you probably don't have a perfect answer available, following is a basic template you can use for your response. You reply with "I don't know, but ..." and add some details:

- Here's what I do know: *(Add what you're sure about.)*
- Here's what I think: *(Speculate about the actual answer.)*
- Here's what I would do to figure it out: *(Describe the steps or resources needed for a complete answer.)*

And then add the magic question:

- Do you want me to look into it?

That last part is key. You're responding quickly, which is really important. You admitted you didn't have the full answer, but you gave the questioner some information that may allow them to make progress. You showed them where you believe the answer will go. Best of all, you gave your boss a rough cost estimate of how hard it would be to find the right answer. Rather than dropping all your current work, this reply lets your boss decide whether it's worth it to take the additional time required to find a complete solution. After all, their job is to make decisions like that.

Remember: employees advise; managers decide. Don't decide to put all your current work on hold to find a perfect answer. Give your boss the chance to make that decision.

At least nine times out of ten, the reply from the boss will be something like, "That's fine. That's all I needed."

For example, applying this to the AI question posed at the beginning of the chapter, the answer might be something like the following:

"How will modern developments in artificial intelligence affect our product? I don't know, but here's what I do know:"

(Here is where you add what you know.)

"I agree that AI and machine learning are growing in importance in the industry. They do basic pattern matching and help you see relationships you might have missed. They've made great strides in areas like computer vision and voice recognition. There's also a lot of work going on in the field, so the tools and techniques are changing on a regular basis."

(Here you put in what you think will happen in the future.)

"I believe the tools will eventually stabilize into some kind of commodity product that can be added to any system that collects data. Eventually we'll be able to download or purchase a tool, point it at the data we've collected on how our users work with our product, and let it guide them toward the answers they probably want."

(Here you list the steps you would take to find out more, giving your manager a rough cost estimate of how much work this would involve.)

"I don't think we're there yet, however, and we're not in the business of building those tools. We could, however, create a demo project that used, for example, the TensorFlow product from Google, and see how easy it would be to train it on our collected data. That would require learning more about Python programming and more about the way that tool is used, but could be done on a small project if you think it's worth it."

(Then add the magic question.)

"Do you want me to look into it?"

Adjust that answer to suit your own opinions, experiences, and biases, but the good part is you can probably assemble an answer similar to that in less than twenty minutes. The best part is that you've accomplished several good things:

1. You answered a tough question quickly, adding caveats as needed to protect yourself.

2. You demonstrated responsiveness to the boss, which is always viewed favorably. Seriously, if you ask a question of a colleague and they get back to you right away, you're thrilled if the answer is any good at all.

3. You gave a preliminary cost estimate of how much time and effort it would take to get a more thorough answer.

4. You removed the task from your attention, so now you can get back to work.

Again, in almost all cases, the boss's reply will be to thank you and move on. You don't know why the boss asked the question in the first place. Maybe they read an article about AI and it triggered some ideas. Maybe they were in a meeting and the topic was brought up by another manager, or even their own boss. Maybe a vendor is trying to sell them a product and they're wondering if it's worth the investment. In any case, you've given them some information right away, and if they need more, they'll ask for it.

The beauty of good-enough answers is that they build the constructive loyalty relationship at a minimum cost to your time and energy. Responding right away always makes the questioner happy. You either confirmed or denied their intuition, which may lead to more questions, or it may not. You also avoided putting real work on hold except when told to do so. By explicitly acknowledging the boss's power to decide how you spend your time, you've assured them that they can ask you a difficult question without interfering in your real work more than necessary.

Every once in a while the boss will tell you to go ahead and spend the extra time. But at least that way it's them making the decision and not you, so they'll have to take responsibility for the lack of progress on other tasks while you're answering their question.

What to Try: Practice Giving Good-Enough Answers

The next time your boss asks an open-ended question, try the suggested template, and do it as soon as you can. Here are a few open-ended questions you can use for practice:

- What if two of our primary competitors merge? How will that affect what we do?

- Are we practicing an agile development methodology? Should we? How can we go beyond whatever we've already done?

- Do we need to open a remote office in China? India? Spain? Cameroon? (Insert country of choice.)

- How has the transition to remote work impacted our company? More to the point, if and when the current pandemic ever ends, how are we going to adjust our work environment?

Most managers are surprised and happy to get a quick answer at all, and often they'll say you don't have to go any further. Being

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What to Try: Practice Giving Good-Enough Answers
responsive is a easy way to build the loyalty relationship and rarely incurs much additional work.

Responding right away to requests builds the constructive loyalty relationship more quickly than any other single technique. By responding, you demonstrate how seriously you take any requests coming from your boss and that you're willing to help them any way you can. It's a subtle, but unmistakable, win.

Being responsive also goes to the heart of the loyalty relationship. Your boss knows you don't have time for a complete answer and they know that you're not currently an expert in the area they asked about. The proposed answer template shows that you felt it was important to give them an answer, while making it clear that your information is currently limited, and you're giving them a basic estimate of what it would take in additional work to give a better answer.