

Extracted from:

Help Your Boss Help You

Convert Conflict Into Opportunities

This PDF file contains pages extracted from *Help Your Boss Help You*, published by the Pragmatic Bookshelf. For more information or to purchase a paperback or PDF copy, please visit <http://www.pragprog.com>.

Note: This extract contains some colored text (particularly in code listing). This is available only in online versions of the books. The printed versions are black and white. Pagination might vary between the online and printed versions; the content is otherwise identical.

Copyright © 2021 The Pragmatic Programmers, LLC.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior consent of the publisher.

The Pragmatic Bookshelf

Raleigh, North Carolina

Help Your Boss Help You

Convert Conflict Into Opportunities



Ken Kousen

Foreword by Glenn Vanderburg

Edited by Michael Swaine

Help Your Boss Help You

Convert Conflict Into Opportunities

Ken Kousen

The Pragmatic Bookshelf

Raleigh, North Carolina



Many of the designations used by manufacturers and sellers to distinguish their products are claimed as trademarks. Where those designations appear in this book, and The Pragmatic Programmers, LLC was aware of a trademark claim, the designations have been printed in initial capital letters or in all capitals. The Pragmatic Starter Kit, The Pragmatic Programmer, Pragmatic Programming, Pragmatic Bookshelf, PragProg and the linking *g* device are trademarks of The Pragmatic Programmers, LLC.

Every precaution was taken in the preparation of this book. However, the publisher assumes no responsibility for errors or omissions, or for damages that may result from the use of information (including program listings) contained herein.

For our complete catalog of hands-on, practical, and Pragmatic content for software developers, please visit <https://pragprog.com>.

The team that produced this book includes:

CEO: Dave Rankin

COO: Janet Furlow

Managing Editor: Tammy Coron

Development Editor: Michael Swaine

Copy Editor: Katharine Dvorak

Layout: Gilson Graphics

Founders: Andy Hunt and Dave Thomas

For sales, volume licensing, and support, please contact support@pragprog.com.

For international rights, please contact rights@pragprog.com.

Copyright © 2021 The Pragmatic Programmers, LLC.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior consent of the publisher.

ISBN-13: 978-1-68050-822-2

Encoded using the finest acid-free high-entropy binary digits.

Book version: P1.0—July 2021

For Cheri, Mem, and Josh

The Dangers of Oversharing

Here is a simple example. Say the company decides to expand into an area you care about. A new project is now available, complete with funding, and you want to lead it. You, therefore, approach your boss to ask for their help in getting that assignment, which likely will involve a promotion.

The problem is, the last interaction you had with your boss went something like this:

BOSS: How are you today?

YOU: Ugh. One of the kids is acting up, and my wife is complaining that I don't spend enough time at home with him.

Now you're asking your boss for a job that may require a lot more time and responsibility. What you don't want is for your boss to think, "I don't know. This job is going to require a lot more of his time and he's already got trouble at home. Maybe I shouldn't add to his burden."

This falls into one of the primary traps: oversharing. You thought your boss was your friend, so you revealed what is arguably an inappropriate amount of detail about your personal life. The hope is that your boss will ignore all of that when it comes time to make decisions about your career, but you can't count on that.

Those sorts of personal considerations should never enter into a decision made by your boss. You can ask your boss to ignore them, but if they really are your friend, will they? It's best not to take that risk.

Remember that there are only two messages you want to give your boss: "I got this," and "I got your back," as discussed in [Chapter 4, Sending the Important Two Messages, on page ?](#). If you treat your boss like your friend, you're interfering with the first message. It's like saying, "I got this, but only if you assume I am fine with all the chaos going on in my life right now." And who wants to say that to someone with direct impact on your career?

That's not to say you should be unfriendly. There's a big difference between being friendly, however, and being friends. The world would be a better place if everyone acted more friendly, but friendship is special. Friends are added selectively. Some of them may even work with you. That's acceptable, as long as there is no inherent power disparity between you and they aren't making decisions about your job or your career.

In other words, here's how the previous conversation should have gone:

BOSS: How are you today?

YOU: Fine, how are you?

Again, there's no reason to be unfriendly. The boundary you are drawing is an internal one. You're protecting yourself by maintaining a professional relationship with the person who matters most to your career.

Maintaining Emotional Distance

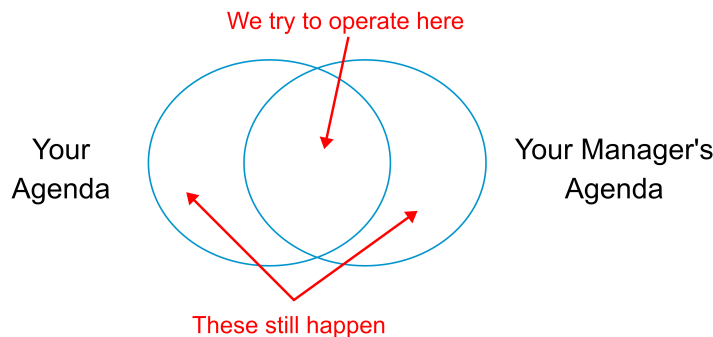
Say you believe your boss is your friend. Your boss joins the rest of the group in social activities after work. Your boss talks about sports, or movies, or other non-work topics with you on a regular basis. Your boss seems to really care about you as a person.

Now that big project comes along that you want to lead, or at least be a part of. Instead, your boss calls you into their office and announces they gave the position to someone else.

"Hey," you might say, "I thought you were my friend!"

No, they're your boss. Your boss is not your friend.

Recall the agenda diagram from [Chapter 1, Making Inevitable Conflict Productive, on page ?](#), reproduced here:



You have an agenda for your job, your career, and your life. Your boss also has an agenda for their job, their career, and their life. We try to operate in the overlap, but the other situations still happen. This was one of them.

Is it possible the decision was personal? It can happen. Maybe the boss believes they're protecting you, as described earlier. Maybe they feel the other person really would be better for the job. Maybe they want to keep you in your current position because you are so valuable there. The decision could come from any number of reasons, some of which might be based on your

ability to do the job and some not. If personal issues factored into the decision, it's even more important that you maintain the emotional distance necessary to avoid being hurt.

If you believe your boss is your friend, the first time they make a decision against you, you're going to be surprised and hurt. If your reaction to a decision that you don't like is ever, "I thought you were my friend," you're learning this lesson.

In principle, it's fine for your boss to be your friend when everything is going well. When a conflict occurs, however, suddenly it's "only business." The truth, though, is that that is how business relationships are supposed to work. You're not supposed to be friends with the boss—the boss has too much power over you for that. And while your boss may be sorry they have to take an action that hurts you, their own priorities and incentives sometimes require them to do it.



Ken says:

If You Were Really My Friend...

A manager friend of mine told me that once when he reprimanded an employee for not performing, the employee responded, "I thought you were my friend!"

The manager replied, "If you really were my friend, you would have done your job and not put me in this position."

If you are relying on friendship to protect you in a difficult work environment, think again.