



What Your Boss Really Wants from You

15 Insights to Improve Your Relationship

Steve Arneson | Berrett-Koehler © 2014

Whether your boss is a perfect leader or a witless fiend, you must get along. To that end, leadership consultant Steve Arneson offers a guidebook that will help angst-ridden employees with baffling bosses. His 15 strategic questions can guide those who work for one of the four types of bad bosses: “the insecure boss,” “the ego-driven boss,” “the control-freak boss” or the “career-focused boss.” Some of Arneson’s counsel may seem a little overly focused on the boss as a person (like keeping a journal of your supervisor’s moods) and some is overly optimistic. For example, such suggestions as, “Stop talking about your boss negatively and start talking...objectively,” only work if you can discover your boss’s redeeming qualities. Helpfully, Arneson also includes advice for those who have a good boss or, at least, an OK one and want to improve their relationship. *getAbstract* suggests this manual to anyone with a boss, especially a problem boss. And if you are a boss seeking some insight, here’s what the world of work looks like from your team’s perspective.

Take-Aways

- At work, no one is more important to you than your boss.
- You can consider 15 factors that will help you improve your relationship with your boss.
- Learn everything you can about your direct supervisor.
- Ask what the boss’s priorities are, and set yours accordingly. Deliver the boss’s priorities every day.
- It’s your responsibility – and not your boss’s – to make your relationship as sound and productive as possible.
- Bad bosses generally fall into one of four categories: “the insecure boss,” “the ego-driven boss,” “the control-freak boss” and the “career-focused boss.”
- You can improve your relationship with each kind using tactics targeted to that type.
- You can’t change your boss’s personality; you can change your attitude and behavior.

- Tell your peers and your boss about your new attitude.
- Each employee has an interior story that features him or her and the boss. In your story, are you the victim and your boss the villain? If so, change your story.

Summary

Your Boss Defines Your Job Experience

No matter where you work, the most important person at your job is your boss. The average employee will probably go through a minimum of 15 to 20 bosses before retirement. So, everyone who draws a salary has to find a way to get along with the higher-ups. And that's not always easy. Good bosses can inspire motivation and loyalty, but bad bosses can make you miserable.

“Your boss has a perception of you...You may not agree with her view, but you can't deny her the right to have one.”

Don't waste time and energy thinking you can change your boss's personality or behavior. Instead, find a way to change yourself – or, at least, how you act at work – so you can get along with your boss. To start, learn everything you can about your job and your supervisor.

Ask these 15 important questions, starting with 10 about your boss as a person:

1. **What are the best way and the best time to approach your boss?** – Bosses interact with employees in very different ways. Some keep their doors open; others require strict appointments. Some prefer phone calls; others prefer emails. Some bosses remain emotionally level; others are moody and changeable. Some will discuss most issues; others stay tightly guarded. Figure out the correct way to interact with your boss. Action steps: Study your boss's behavior to learn how to connect. Maintain a journal to track the boss's moods and use the information to determine the best time to meet to get the results that you want.
2. **What management style does your boss like best?** – Bosses have personal ways of handling three tasks at work: developing ideas, creating presentations, and executing plans and projects. Your boss will never adapt his or her built-in work style to fit yours. You will have to adapt your style of work to how your boss does things and what your boss wants from you. Pay close attention to how your boss makes decisions. This is important. Many of the choices your supervisor makes directly affect you. Some decisions will even be about you. Action steps: Note how your boss likes to work. Adjust your work style accordingly.
3. **What actions does your supervisor reinforce?** – You have to know what bosses want, and what rewards or feedback to expect from them if you deliver. Most managers won't or can't come out and say, “This is a big deal to me.” You'll likely need to figure that out for yourself. Learn it, and then base your behavior on what your boss values most. Also be alert about tasks your boss actually wants you to avoid. Action steps: Write a “do and don't list” about your

boss's preferences. Act accordingly. Don't worry if the boss's do's and don'ts aren't rational. They make sense to him or her, and that's the arena you are working in.

4. **What are your boss's goals?** – Learn your boss's professional mandate and main objectives. How do they compare with yours? Directly ask your boss what he or she wants to achieve. Determine how your supervisor defines your primary function and how to meet those targets. Does your manager have a traditional attitude about your job, or should you go in a new direction? Action steps: Write down your goals and the goals you attribute to your manager. Make sure your actions support both missions.
5. **What issues concern your boss?** – Your boss is sure to be worried about something. Action steps: Pay attention to your boss's demeanor. He or she could be uptight about something outside work. Learn your manager's priorities, perhaps by noticing how he or she allocates time and attention. How can you contribute to those priorities?
6. **How does the rest of the company regard your supervisor?** – Investigating your boss's leadership brand is an important step. How the company views your boss will affect how it views your department's team, including you. What do people inside the company say about your boss? Do they regard him or her with respect? Action steps: Be like Sherlock Holmes and observe with care everything your boss says and does. Pay close attention to body language and physical demeanor. Define your boss's leadership brand as thoroughly as possible. Is it "strategic, results-oriented, fair, passionate, customer-oriented and trustworthy"?
7. **Are there people in the company whom your supervisor admires?** – Observe which relationships your boss builds in order to understand whom he or she respects. Find out why those relationships matter to your boss. When you see to whom your boss devotes attention, you can also see whom he or she doesn't consult or respect. That's useful information. Action steps: Develop a "boss relationship map" that outlines the good and bad relationships you observe at the executive level. Use the map to navigate your interactions.
8. **How much influence does your boss have and in what area of the organization?** – Your boss's power definitely affects your circumstances at work. Whatever your boss's reputation, good or bad, he or she still has significant influence. Is your manager a thought leader in the company? Are his or her directives always followed as outlined? Action steps: Using the map described above, include information that shows who your boss influences. If you can, "leverage that influence." Determine the primary organizational issues that your boss directly controls or affects.
9. **How does your boss relate to higher-up executives?** – This important information will help you determine what your boss wants you to deliver. How your boss gets along with his or her boss plays a primary role. Determine if they share mutual respect. Does your manager have trouble securing "face time" with his or her boss? Action steps: Write down the words your boss uses to describe his or her boss. Use this information to develop a relationship with your boss's boss, especially if your boss lacks a strong connection to the next person up the ladder.
10. **What drives your boss?** – Understanding your boss's "primary motivation" and "single biggest driver" is the most important, influential information you can develop. Typical motives

might be “job security, advancement, money, recognition, risk aversion, results orientation, complete control (ego) and a desire to be liked by everyone.” Your boss’s motivations determine his or her behavior toward you. Action steps: Use awareness of the boss’s motivations to develop a plan for working together effectively. Orient your work activities to support the boss’s path to achieving his or her primary goal.

“Consider How Your Boss Sees You”

Understanding your boss’s attitude and behavior is only part of the puzzle. You also need to know what your boss thinks of you. Talk to your peers about your boss’s perspective.

“Your boss is the central character in your work life ...We remember our bosses because they have a significant impact on our overall work performance.”

Use these questions to obtain as much information as you can:

11. **What does your boss appreciate about you?** – Bosses often ignore – and thus don’t take advantage of – some of their employees’ skills. Staff members often complain, “My boss doesn’t want to hear about my previous work experiences; it’s like I never learned anything in my past jobs.” Determine what your boss thinks of your abilities. Action steps: List your top 10 to 12 skills. Determine which ones your boss calls upon fully. Insecure bosses often worry that their direct reports are more talented than they are. As a result, many keep their most talented people in a box. Demonstrate all your abilities.
12. **How important are you to your boss’s goals?** – Does your manager regard you as integral to attaining his or her goals? Action steps: Become aware of the “major themes of your boss’s mission.” Determine your boss’s main goals in terms of your personal involvement. This will help you figure out how important you are to your manager. Position yourself so that your attitude and skills match your boss’s agenda. Become indispensable to your supervisor’s mission and fundamental to his or her successful future. However, never overestimate your importance; your boss is still the boss.
13. **What does your boss think you could do better?** – Your boss doesn’t think you’re perfect, so where do you need to improve? Don’t rely on a performance appraisal; your manager may not reveal everything in a formal setting. Listen carefully to what your boss says about ways how you can step up. Look for the messages implied by what he or she doesn’t say. Action steps: Ask your supervisor: “What skills can I develop that would add more value for you?” Improve accordingly.
14. **How does your boss describe you?** – Your boss’s job includes evaluating your potential for professional development and sharing this assessment with higher-up executives. Your boss will rate you against an ideal employee profile and against your peers. Action steps: Decide whether to model yourself after your supervisor’s “favorites.” Determine if your manager supports you in conversations that occur when you aren’t around.

15. **What is your track record with your boss?** – It’s difficult to plan a viable future with your boss unless you understand the past you’ve shared. Consider whether your current boss is the person who hired you or someone who joined the team after you. Were you once peers? Is your relationship on the upswing or deteriorating? Action steps: Draw a horizontal line on a piece of paper. Note positive episodes with your boss above the line and negative episodes below it. This simple graph will help you understand your overall relationship with your boss and where you stand now. Try to see your relationship as your boss sees it.

“Take Responsibility for the Relationship”

After doing all you can to discover who your boss really is and what he or she thinks of you, assume responsibility for this relationship – which means more than taking the action steps you’ve already outlined. Everything begins with attitude – how you envision your manager in the future and how you will adapt or change your behavior. Your attitude reflects your emotions about your boss, feelings that are “seen, heard and felt by others – body language, tone of voice and facial expressions.” Start your attitude adjustment by speaking about your boss to a trusted peer. Or write down your thoughts. Bringing your emotions to the surface helps you change your point of view.

“Your boss’s ability to influence the organization affects his confidence, attitude and behavior. What he wants from you...may depend on how he feels about his own current level of influence.”

Use this three-part process to change your attitude:

1. **Develop a new perspective about your relationship** – You’ve laid the foundation by amassing information about your boss.
2. **Change the story in your mind about your boss** – Story modification means changing the story you tell yourself about you and your boss. In an ineffective story, you are the hero and your boss is the villain. No sound relationship can develop if this is how you regard your supervisor. Broaden your perspective to transform your story.
3. **Broadcast your new attitude to your boss and others** – Without being negative, let your peers – and most importantly, your boss – know about your attitude adjustment.

“Your boss experiences all kinds of stress. Your boss’s motives may involve things you never thought of, like tension or anxiety.”

Make a concrete plan to change your behavior if necessary. Note behaviors your boss may find irritating and stop them. Take responsibility for your relationship with your boss no matter who he or she is. Unfortunately some bosses are real losers.

The most common bad-boss types are:

- **“The insecure boss”** – Fear drives this paranoid boss who wants you to keep your head down. Find gentle ways to push this boss toward a calculated risk. Act as your boss’s PR agent so people will see him or her more positively. If things don’t improve with an insecure boss, it’s time to get a different one, even if you have to leave your organization.
- **“The ego-driven boss”** – This boss psychologically can’t afford to be wrong – ever. He or she wants you always “to do, not think.” Make sure to execute flawlessly. Do your best to ignore obnoxious behavior. Just learn whatever you can; then go elsewhere.
- **“The control-freak boss”** – This boss is the ultimate micromanager. Never challenge this type of supervisor. Use diplomacy by saying, for example, “Do you mind if I try another solution as well?” You can be direct with this boss. Just say that micromanagement doesn’t work for you: for example, “I’m feeling a bit stifled; can we work together to allow me more latitude in how things get done?”
- **“The career-focused boss”** – This type has one mission: to get promoted. Your job, in the boss’s eyes, is to make him or her look good. Do so, but never compromise your ethics or morality in the process. This type is liable to make enemies, so work on your own “relationship-building skills.” If this supervisor blows up – not unusual for career-focused bosses – you’ll want to have someone else ready who can jump in and sponsor you in the future.

“Bosses are human, too.”

No matter how you change your attitude and behavior, don’t expect your boss to make things better. Change is your responsibility, so take the initiative.

About the Author

Steve Arneson, founder of Arneson Leadership Consulting, wrote the bestseller *Bootstrap Leadership*.



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