



How to Talk to Your Boss About Being Overworked

To help you effectively broach the subject of your insane workload with your boss, heed the following advice from executive coaches

Diann Daniel 07 February, 2007 15:41:55

Twelve-hour workdays packed with mile-long to-do lists and meetings on top of meetings. Mobile phones and BlackBerrys that are always on, and laptops you take home to squeeze in one more hour of work. With companies firmly focused on growth after several long years of belt-tightening, employees' workloads are heavier than ever. What can you do to cope with on-the-job scope creep? Stand up and say something before your head explodes. To help you effectively broach the subject of your insane workload with your boss, heed the following advice from executive coaches and leadership gurus.

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First of all, don't complain if you're the root of your problems. In other words, if procrastination or other bad work habits are the reason why projects are piling up on your desk, you can't expect your supervisor to be sympathetic to your plight. You have to "earn the right" to tell your boss you're swamped by meeting or beating your performance expectations, says Curtis Crawford, president and CEO of XCEO, a leadership development consultancy. He notes that overworked individuals often get that way because they're good at what they do and because they get things done. Consequently, management gives them more responsibility. By contrast, Crawford adds, "a person at 50 percent of their sales plan would have great difficulty talking to me about being overworked". Even if your performance is respectable, you shouldn't bring up the subject of feeling overburdened out of the blue; the conversation should be part of a series of ongoing

discussions with your supervisor about your priorities, goals, performance and workload. Use these talks to keep your boss informed of your ongoing projects and the work requests you're getting, counsels Bob Whyte, CEO of Integrated Performance Technology, a Los Angeles-based IT and motor sports consultancy. Over-communication is a valuable tool in combating heavy workloads: If your boss knows what's on your plate, he'll be less inclined to add more.

Steady and honest communication with your supervisor allows you to take the next step: pushing back when the boss tries to heap more work on you.

"At the moment of additional assignments, it is critical to not immediately say yes," says Kay Cannon, a professional business coach and president of the International Coach Federation. But you also can't simply say that you have too much work to take on new projects. "Coming in only with problems makes you look like a victim. You want to be perceived as a leader," says Barbara Somma, a former long-time director at Johnson & Johnson who's now a professional business coach.

Instead of complaining, Cannon advises, employees should negotiate new assignments with their bosses by explaining how this request impacts the priorities they previously agreed on and by suggesting new priorities in line with the business's overall goals. Sheleen Quish, a technology business consultant and former CIO of US Can Company, recommends coming to the table with alternative ideas on how to handle the workload. "Say: 'We can take 12 days and \$X and do this or a month and \$Y and do that. Here's what I recommend'," Quish says. The idea is not just to say: "I handle my workload better", but to present alternatives and potential solutions that help the boss decide what he thinks is best.

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Your human resources department can also be an ally in supporting your case for a lighter load. HR can provide data that demonstrates the dangers of overtime or the number of sick days employees are taking. Don't be afraid to cite these statistics when explaining to your boss how stress can impair one's ability, Whyte advises.

Talking with your boss may not immediately change your workload. In the interim, you can take a couple of measures yourself. First, delegate what you can and a great team. Don't think for them, but teach them and help them be better trained," says Cannon. Hand off a pet project to your team to demonstrate your abilities.

Second, set hard boundaries about your work hours and e-mail and mobile phone availability. These walls will keep work from leaking into other parts of your life, preventing you from becoming overwhelmed and creating additional stress.

Managing your workload isn't a short process. Initiate conversations with your boss about your performance and priorities today, and don't say that everything is under control. Before you get to a crisis point, try setting your priorities on your own, then with your boss's help. When the time comes to disagree, then do so. If you're giving your boss the "you've always come through" speech, or worse, by saying: "If you can't get it done, I'll find someone who can", respectfully hold your ground. Advises employees to say to their bosses, "If you want me to be the best I can be and do a great job, then you have to help me. If I didn't believe the workload would impact on my performance, which isn't good for you or for me, I would not bring it to your attention." "Typically," says Crawford, "the boss will swallow hard and see what we can do."

SIDEBAR: Cliches to Avoid Like the Plague

Gretchen Hirsch's book *Talking Your Way to the Top: Business English That Works* (Prometheus Books, 2006) contains lots of ideas on how to win friends your English. It also includes words and phrases to avoid. Here are seven cliches Hirsch says should never pass your lips, along with our interpretation of

- **Bottom line** A way to sound authoritative when you can't be bothered to figure out the details.
- **Continuous improvement** A mythical goal that subtly reminds employees that their jobs are never safe.
- **Exceeded our expectations** Used to laud a project's or employee's value and impress your boss (and cover up the fact that you never outlined clear expectations).
- **New and improved** These words are actually contradictory. Is it new? Or is it old but improved? But you used three words instead of one. Who can argue?
- **No-brainer** A bully tactic. Anyone who doesn't agree clearly has no brain.
- **On the same page** A way to give your boss the impression that you are 100 percent behind his new idea.
- **Team player** Anyone who disagrees with you is not one.
- **You go, girl** Bottom line: Never, ever use this. It's a no-brainer.

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