

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-best-way-to-ask-for-a-raise-or-promotion-what-science-tells-us-11592000637>

JOURNAL REPORTS: LEADERSHIP

The Best Way to Ask for a Raise or Promotion: What Science Tells Us

Stop thinking about yourself and what you need and deserve. And start thinking about what your boss needs.

By Tessa West

Updated June 14, 2020 9:30 am ET

When it comes to asking for a promotion or raise, most of us focus the conversation around the same thing: ourselves.

Before walking into that high-stakes meeting, we carefully pore through advice on how to convince our boss that “I deserve this.” We learn the importance of appearing confident, trustworthy and respectful—all in hopes that it will make our boss see that we have the expertise and leadership skills to justify a better job or higher pay.

Of course, convincing your boss of your competence and expertise is important. But it is rarely enough. Even the most deserving among us often walk away from these meetings disappointed. One [survey](#) found that only 39% of employees got the raise amount they requested, with “budgetary constraints”—not whether the employee deserved it—cited as the most common (yet least believed) reason bosses give for their decision.

How can you move the needle in your favor? How can you make it more likely you leave that meeting with what you ask for? Surprisingly, research suggests that the way to get more money or a promotion is to stop thinking about *yourself*, and start thinking about your boss.

Specifically, the key to getting what you want is to be able to answer the following three questions:

How much social status does your boss have?

Social science has taught that one of the biggest factors in getting what you want out of people at work is our status: the respect, esteem and prestige that you hold in the eyes of others within

the organization. So it makes sense that if you're asking your boss to get you something, it's the boss's status that you need to worry about, not your own.

Think of two middle managers at the same company: One charms others into doing favors for him on a regular basis, while the other spends his time doing those favors. The former manager has a lot of social status, the latter has very little. Obviously, you want to find out which one of those people best describes your boss.

Unfortunately, many people aren't very good at reading the status of others. What's more, that ability becomes more difficult when we move outside of our immediate groups. We know who on our team can ask the boss for an extension or a day off without much pushback, and who would get stonewalled. But understanding the social status of those above us—including our boss, and even our boss's boss? It's a skill most people don't bother acquiring.

That's a mistake. Before asking for a raise, it's crucial to do a little digging to find out how your boss's "success rate" measures up to that of other bosses at the same level in the organization. The more social capital your boss has, the more you may be able to ask for.

The best way to unearth your boss's social capital is to form connections with those above you. By interacting with high-status people, you can develop an accurate knowledge of the status hierarchy.

Another approach is to be more transparent with your colleagues, and welcome transparency from them, in an effort to find out how much your boss has been able to do for others. Yes, it's awkward to ask people how much money they make, and it's even more awkward to tell someone that you make more than them (not to mention the risk of being labeled a braggart). But realize that a culture of secrecy benefits no one except the boss. In negotiations, knowledge is power. If you know your boss has a high success rate, and what the boss has done for others, it puts you in a better position in knowing what to ask for.

What happens if you do your homework and find out your boss has very little social status? Do you give up? No, but you might have to think outside the box. Maybe you ask for small-ticket items for now. Maybe you try to change bosses.

Most important, understand that social status isn't static. As Nathan Pettit, a professor at New York University's Stern School of Business, and Jennifer Carson Marr, a professor at the University of Maryland, recently showed, social status changes over time—hierarchies at work are constantly shifting. So don't despair: There's a chance your boss will be back in the black again.

What does your request "cost" your boss in social capital?

There's a good chance that every request your boss fulfills costs him social capital. And some requests cost a lot more than others. When we focus on whether we deserve something, we often lose sight of how costly our specific requests are.

On top of this, the relative costs of things are not always clear. At New York University, where I work, I was surprised to learn that the most expensive request is a faculty apartment with two bedrooms. They are a rare commodity. If my boss gives me one, then he probably can't ask for another two-bedroom apartment for someone else for quite some time. Raises, by contrast, are much easier to secure. Money is relatively easy to dole out, living space is not.

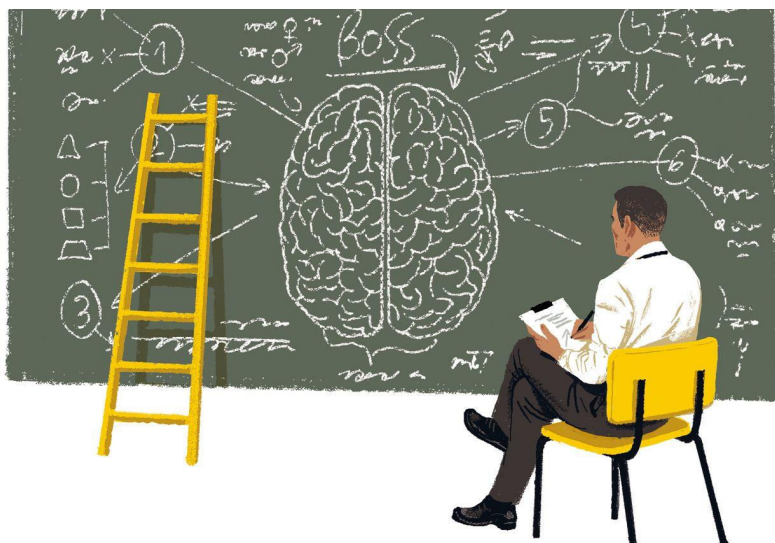


PHOTO: PEP MONTSERRAT

Unfortunately, most people have no idea what our bosses pay for things. I once worked with an organization on facilitating leadership development for junior employees. I met with two groups of people back-to-back: first, the junior employees who wanted more leadership opportunities, and second, their bosses whose job was to decide who got those opportunities. The junior group told me that they were routinely “blocked” by their bosses from getting the promotions they needed to improve. They attributed their bosses’ behaviors to “a lack of respect” or “little motivation” to help them.

Their bosses were dumbfounded. “Don’t they understand what it takes to get just *one* of them a raise!” they would tell me.

The fact was they *didn’t* understand. They hadn’t bothered to find out.

So, how do you find out the real costs of requests? The best negotiators don’t jump in with their asks right away, but engage in a long and drawn-out process of gathering information from the person on the other side of the table. Here, this means finding out all of the options that may come with a promotion in your organization—from salary increases to better parking spots—and also finding out how difficult it is for your boss to secure these options, *before* you ask for anything. Again, knowledge is power.

Admittedly, getting this information can be uncomfortable. People will avoid seeking information during negotiations, especially when the person they are negotiating with is higher status than them, because it simply feels better to go along to get along. You might be tempted to jump in with what you want just to kill the tension. But coming in too early with your ask is a mark of a bad negotiator.

Keep in mind that once you know the price tag of what you're asking for, you can be more creative with your request. If a big raise is hard to come by, perhaps suggest it be paid out incrementally over several months. Or maybe permission to do outside freelance work will be both easy for the boss to grant and more lucrative to you.

In other words, it could be that what is cheap for your boss to give is what is going to bring you the biggest benefit. But you won't know that if you haven't asked the question.

What problems does your request solve for your boss?

Learning how to convince other people to give you what you want requires that you first figure out what scratches their itch. This means figuring out how to frame your raise as a win for your boss. The more closely your promotion is tied to fulfilling the boss's needs, the more successful you will be.

Perhaps, for instance, your promotion comes with the new responsibility to train other team members or make day-to-day decisions that would free up your boss's time so he can focus on his own goals. Or perhaps it solves a diversity problem in his department.

Just make sure those benefits to the boss will come quickly. Most of us are loss-averse—we care more about losing money and social capital right now than we care about a hypothetical gain in the future. Your boss will likely feel the immediate social cost of getting you a promotion long before she sees her decision pay out. You want to reassure her that some gains will be felt in the short term.

While I was working with the organization on leadership development, one of the junior employees approached me during the lunch break and said that she was able to secure one of the coveted leadership spots, even though she knew it wasn't because she was more qualified than others.

When I asked how she pulled it off, she told me that she brought a copy of her boss's weekly meeting schedule—which was available to all employees—to her boss's office, and highlighted the time slots where she could step in to save her boss time. "I found about 15 hours a week she would gain if she promoted me and handed off some of her responsibilities." That did the trick.

JOURNAL REPORT

Insights from [The Experts](#)

Read more at [WSJ.com/LeadershipReport](https://www.wsj.com/LeadershipReport)

MORE IN C-SUITE STRATEGIES

[The Surprising Strategy for Acing a Job Interview](#)

[People Like Their Mentors to Be Cheerleaders. That May Be a Mistake](#)

[Campbell Soup's Gameplan to Keep Growing Past Lockdown](#)

[Customer Complaints, and Their Ways of Complaining, Are On The Rise](#)

[What Will Business School Look Like in the Fall](#)

[The Surprising Way Companies Can Shore Up Their Financial Strength](#)

This employee was a master of perspective-taking. She was able to consider the world from her boss's viewpoint, and frame her requests in terms of her boss's needs. And indeed, as psychologist Adam Galinsky and his collaborators have [shown](#), perspective-taking—"getting inside your boss's head"—is one of the most critical first steps toward getting what you want out of a negotiation.

Just remember: Getting inside your boss's head won't come naturally. Social science has taught us that lower-ranking people are more attentive to the behaviors of higher-ranking people than vice versa. Just because you notice your boss's behaviors and remember, for example, what she said to you in the elevator last week doesn't mean *she* remembers. So recognize that you may be kind of a blank spot in the boss's head. If you want her to know what you've been doing, and what you can do for her, you need to explicitly tell her.

It may not be fair, but it comes back to the same point. To get what you want, to get what is fair and what you deserve, you have to stop focusing on what is fair and what you deserve. The sooner you realize that, the more likely it is that you will get it.

Dr. West is an associate professor of psychology at New York University. She can be reached at reports@wsj.com.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

Tell us about your strategies for winning raises throughout your career. Join the conversation below.

College Rankings

Energy

Funds/ETFs

Health Care

Leadership

Retirement

Small Business

Technology

Wealth Management

Copyright © 2020 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <https://www.djreprints.com>.