

What Your Boss Tells His Dog About You

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When we get upset sometimes, we vent frustration by sharing information with our spouse, friends, or even our pets. The ability to verbalize the annoyance, even to a being that cannot respond, can be cathartic. A supervisor may feel it is safer to gripe about a subordinate to a family member than to complain to people at work for several reasons.

It can be difficult to know if one is being objective or is perhaps overly sensitive to annoyances. Talking out the issue with a neutral party is one way to analyze the situation to gain perspective, or it can be simply a way to let out some stress.

Here are some statements your boss may be telling his dog while on an evening walk, or more likely his wife at the dinner table. Note that I am using the "boss" as only an example here. All of the points made here can also apply to others in the workplace including peers or even subordinates.

- Jake is really annoying lately. He is always late and does not seem to notice that I notice.
- I cannot get Samantha to get her weekly report in on time. She is just not motivated.
- George is always stirring up trouble at work. Honestly, sometimes I think he just likes to pick fights.
- Beth has an attitude. She seems to have the idea that we are all there just to cater to her every need.
- The Quality Group is a bunch of babies. All they do is moan and cry about how they cannot have new lab equipment.

In a highly transparent environment, the boss would discuss these frustrations directly with the people involved and clear the air. That is the obvious antidote, and yet there are conversations like the above examples going on every day. If you are a leader, I suspect you are saying, "I never make these kinds of complaints to my family about people at work." If you really have been able to totally abstain, then I will nominate you for sainthood, but the rest of us do sometimes succumb to the temptation to explain our

petulant mood in graphic detail to loved ones who can only listen and offer naive (or sometimes worthwhile) guidance. I do not see anything wrong with this venting as long as it does not become a habitual communication pattern. What is important is to figure out how to know if your boss has frustrations that he or she is not telling you. Here are some ways you can tell:

Watch the body language

We communicate emotional issues much more through body language than through words (more than five times the amount). If you have not been exposed to the subtle clues to communicating through body language, get some training. There are numerous free resources online. Just type "Body Language" in any good search engine. The caveat with reading body language is that you should avoid taking everything literally. Use the 5 "C's" method of identifying significant body language patterns:

1. Context - What is the background activity that is happening?
2. Clusters - Several discrete signals mean more than a single gesture.
3. Congruence - Do words and Body Language agree? If not, probe for reasons.
4. Consistency - What is the baseline behavior versus specific Body Language?
5. Culture - Consider the social norms of the person.

Ask more questions

Rather than advocating your position on issues, probe and ask a lot of questions. The Socratic Method is a great way to get the boss to open up about what he or she is thinking. Ask reasonable open-ended questions that form a pattern by which you can understand what the boss really thinks.

Listen to the tone of voice

The tone of voice contains about 40% of total communication. You can detect anxiety or anger by noting whether the pitch is either much higher than usual (typical for anxiety) or much lower than usual (often the case if the boss is angry). Cadence is also another clue. If the boss is speaking faster than usual, it normally signals anxiety, while an uncharacteristically slow cadence is often an expression of extreme frustration.

Be alert to the grapevine

If the boss is having issues with you, sometimes the information will leak out to the grapevine. While it is wrong to take all rumors and gossip at face value, it would be wrong to ignore signals coming from peers. If something sounds ominous, get some time with the boss and check things out using open-ended questions.

Cultivate a strong relationship with the Administrative Assistant

The administrative assistant to the boss often has inside knowledge. Personal integrity will prevent this person from telling you information directly, but if you have built up a good relationship with this person, there are many subtle ways a personal assistant can discretely let you know when there are issues. It is always a good strategy to be helpful (but not patronizing) with the Administrative Assistant to the boss.

Communicate often

Keep the lines of communication as open as you can. One hint is to find the boss' preferred mode of communication and use that most often. For example, I had one boss who preferred the use of voice mail. He found that more convenient than e-mail. I would communicate with him daily on the voice mail for decisions, etc. I would downplay e-mail. Another boss was strong on e-mail, so the majority of strategy questions went out in that form.

Look for shifts in communication patterns

It is a danger signal if the boss changes frequency of contact with you. It may be easily explained by a peak workload situation, an upcoming trip, a special project, or several other logical shifts. The point is to find out if the change could be due to some frustration the boss has with you that is not being shared. The boss may actually be avoiding contact with you. If so, you need to understand why. Don't just assume it is because the person is busy.

Practice reflective listening

When interfacing with the boss directly, it is a great opportunity to practice reflective listening. Human beings generally have a more difficult time with listening than with any other form of communication. That is because when we are "listening" much of our mental processes are tied up preparing to speak. The technique of reflective listening forces you to really internalize the message, which is critical if you want to pick up on frustrations the boss is having with you. One caution; reflective listening can be annoying if it is applied in a cumbersome way. You need to be trained on how to use this technique smoothly and naturally for it to be effective.

Discuss any frustrations you have

Opening up about your own frustrations with other people or even the boss can help get honest dialog going. That is healthy because it establishes a safe environment for honest communication. I remember telling my boss once, "If you are half as frustrated with me as I am with Frank, I am in a lot of trouble." His silence let me know that he was indeed frustrated with my performance at that time.

Volunteer to help out

Stepping forward to help out is a great way to let the boss know you care about improving conditions. That may open up some lines of communication that were previously blocked.

The boss is a human being and will often make a decision to vent frustrations about you to the family or even pets rather than discuss them with you. Follow the ideas above and you will have a better track record of getting more accurate information directly from the boss.

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