

10 Power Questions to Handle the Boss from Hell

By Andrew Sobel, coauthor of
[Power Questions: Build Relationships, Win New Business, and Influence Others](#)

“And by the way—I also need you to come in on Sunday. We’re down a couple of people and have to play catch-up.” That’s what Bill Lumbergh, the fictitious boss-from-hell in the cult film *Office Space* tells his hapless subordinate Peter Gibbons. Unfortunately, most of us have had to work for an insensitive, demanding boss at one time or another. Such a person can make life miserable. Unfortunately there is not much you can *say* to change a boss who is by nature impervious to others’ feelings. But there is plenty you can *ask*. To help fend off a difficult boss and give yourself some breathing room, try these questions.

1. Your boss pulls you aside and tells you that you really need to change the way you interact with your colleagues. “You’re too brusque—you don’t motivate people!”
 - ⇒ **ASK:** “Could you help me understand what I’m doing wrong by sharing a couple of examples where I have been brusque with others?”
 - ⇒ **ASK:** “Can you make some specific suggestions for how I could interact with people in a more motivating manner?”

When someone tells you to change your behavior, always ask them to be specific!

2. It’s Friday afternoon, and your boss gives you a large folder and says, “I need you to analyze all of these customer service reports and get me a summary for Monday morning.” You’re already overloaded with five other “urgent” projects, and have a full weekend planned with your family. He does this all the time to you.
 - ⇒ **ASK:** “How should I prioritize this relative to the other deliverables I’ve committed to for early next week? I don’t want to let you or any of the other department heads down, but I don’t think it’s feasible to get everything done for Monday at this point.”
 - ⇒ **ASK:** “Can you tell me a little more about how this will be used and exactly when you need it by? I can work late on it tonight and come in early Monday, but even then I’m not sure I can get it done to the quality I’d like due to a family event I’m really committed to this weekend.”

This is a tricky dilemma to navigate. You don’t want to turn your boss down, but you also have other important priorities in your life to respect. Putting more facts on the table, about your other commitments and about your boss’s need, can help unlock the situation.

3. Your boss is under intense pressure from your organization’s senior leadership, and is coming in early and working late every date. He’s also getting short-tempered and overly-critical—he’s carping at everyone and micromanaging at every turn. He tells you and your colleagues, “We’ve got a series of deadlines to meet and I need you all to pull together and really start putting in the elbow grease.” Looking straight at you,

he ends by saying, “And that means no days off or leaving early for the foreseeable future. No exceptions!” In private:

- ⇒ **ASK:** “Can you share with me how our leadership is going to evaluate *your own* performance at the end of the year? What specific goals are you personally being held to?”
- ⇒ **ASK:** “What can I do to support you and help you with your key priorities?”

Until you understand the other person’s “agenda” of critical goals and priorities, you don’t know how to really help them. Offering help is a powerful, memorable gesture.

4. You’ve just had a lukewarm performance review with your boss. He’s rated you a “B” on your company’s evaluation scale, which is A, B, or C.

- ⇒ **ASK:** “If, at my next performance review, I wanted to exceed your expectations for me, what specifically would I need to have done between now and then?”
- ⇒ **ASK:** “From your perspective, what do you think should be my priorities in the short, medium, and long term?”

Always try to get your boss—or anyone else—to define what success looks like to them. Armed with this knowledge, your battle is already half won.

5. You’ve just been humiliatingly raked over the coals by your boss—in front of several co-workers. Afterwards:

- ⇒ **ASK:** “I’m curious, who was the best executive you ever worked for? What were they like?”
- ⇒ **ASK:** “I expect you to give me direction and, when I fall short, point it out to me. I have to ask, however: Are you aware that I feel demeaned when you criticize me sharply front of my coworkers? It makes it difficult to actually hear the message and take action.”

There are times when you simply have to confront your boss about their extreme or abusive behavior. Posing that feedback as a question can make it poignant and palatable—and it makes the other person think about the impact they are having on you.

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