

How To Talk To Your Boss When You Feel Disrespected

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 26 March 2024

Feeling disrespected at work can be tough – whether it's the abrupt email you received, the way you were undermined in a meeting, or the series of microaggressions that have eroded your confidence. If there's one word that comes up repeatedly in workplace mediation, it's respect. "You don't respect my opinion." "You treat me with a complete lack of respect." "If only you'd shown me a modicum of respect!"

These experiences can trigger a range of emotions – anger, frustration, even sadness. And when the dynamic of perceived disrespect has been created with a boss, it can be more complex and difficult to manage. People regularly report feeling helpless and powerless to speak up to their boss because they fear the potential consequences: Will it affect job security, impact promotion prospects, or damage their reputation? Whether it's a niggle that keeps gnawing away at you, or an issue that could escalate into destructive conflict, addressing these challenges is important. The relationship between employee and manager is critical, so here are three steps you can take when you feel disrespected by your boss.

1. Process the situation

A helpful first step is to identify what's going on for you. This means checking in with yourself. What are you feeling? What is triggering you? What do you fear? Perhaps you're irritated because your boss tends to show up late for meetings with you but seems to get to others on time. Is this because they respect you less? What about the team staffing proposal you submitted, which your boss hasn't even replied to? Is that because there are job cuts ahead?

Next, assess the situation. Would it be useful to speak with your boss about what is going on for you? What are the risks, versus the impact of not doing anything? What could be the benefits of speaking to your boss? You may be able to work this through by yourself, but you might also benefit from a sounding board, such as a trusted work colleague or family member. Armed with greater self-awareness and an appreciation of the pros and cons of speaking with your boss directly, you can decide whether to have a conversation, or whether you're happy to leave it for now.

2. Prepare for the conversation

Assuming you decide to have a conversation, what next? Preparation. There are two aspects to this: preparing yourself, and preparing for the other person. To prepare yourself, think about what you want to say. Ask yourself, what do I want to get across? How can I express myself so that my boss can hear me and not become defensive? Finding non-judgemental language is particularly helpful here. Rather than saying "You really upset me..." try "I felt upset by..."

It is also useful to have a goal for what you want to get out of the conversation. It might be that you want to speak with your boss about the impact their behavior has on you, or you want them to

recognize your feelings, or you want to build a better relationship with them in the future. Having a goal in mind is important because it helps to anchor the conversation and focus on the positives that can come out of it. The second stage of preparation is trying to imagine things from your boss's perspective. How might they be feeling? How might they respond? What might they say or ask?

3. Putting it into effect

Not every situation needs to be addressed directly with the other person. Sometimes, thinking it through and considering your boss's or colleague's perspective might give you new ways of looking at the issue, and you might decide that's all you need. At other times, you might decide that you'd like to take action. Maybe the event was significant, or it feels like a pattern of behavior that needs to be addressed. Every situation is unique, and only you know what's right for you.

If you decide to have a conversation, there's only so much you can anticipate. Your boss may react in a way you hadn't predicted, or their perspective may reveal things you were unaware of. You can't prepare for every eventuality, but you can rehearse yourself to stay calm and listen with interest and an open mind. Remember that this conversation will be a dialogue, and that listening to what your boss has to say will also shed light on what has been going on for you both.

Everyone deserves to feel respected. In fact, studies show that respect was ranked as the most important leadership behavior. After you use the three steps above, you can go a step further. You can express gratitude that your boss made time to speak, acknowledge their feelings, and take responsibility for any part you played in the tension in your relationship. By role-modeling respectful behaviors, you can show yourself as a leader, which will bring its own rewards.