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## **ARTICLE** **DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS**

# How to Ask for a Raise

*by Carolyn O'Hara*

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The best managers know when it's time to increase your pay for a job well done. But what if your salary hasn't gone up in a while? What if you think you deserve to be paid more? Asking for raise is always a tough conversation. How do you prepare for it? And how can you make it easier for your manager to say yes?

## What the Experts Say

It can be difficult to approach your manager for a raise. "But there's an art to the ask," says Diana Faison, a partner with leadership development firm Flynn Heath Holt Leadership. "You want to be able to demonstrate how you add value and how you've made a difference to the company." And as in any type of negotiations, you should try to put yourself in the other person's shoes, and design your approach accordingly. "You have to think about why your boss should even consider granting

your request,” says Kathleen McGinn, professor of business administration at Harvard Business School. By understanding your boss’s interests and goals, and aligning those with your own case, you are more likely to get what you want. Here’s how to craft your request.

### **Gather evidence**

Preparation is critical. “If you don’t prepare, you don’t know what you’re really asking for,” says Faison. Collect two types of evidence before making your request. First, and most important, are facts about your own unique contributions that bolster your case: money-saving efficiencies you implemented, results from a project you’ve just overseen, positive customer testimonials, or praise from higher ups. Your boss may not be aware of all you’ve accomplished over the past year. You should also gather information about company- and industry-wide salaries so you can go in with a reasonable target figure in mind. Your professional network, HR department, and sites like PayScale and GlassDoor are all helpful resources for determining your worth in the marketplace.

### **Choose the right moment**

Most people make their pitch at review time. But if your boss is overwhelmed by the pressure of completing everyone’s evaluations, he may be less inclined to grant your request. He may also already be constrained by a set budget. Instead, time your request to coincide with changes in your own tasks. McGinn advises asking for a raise just before you take on new responsibilities or right after you successfully complete a project. “If you’ve just created a whole bunch of value for your company, it’s a great time to say, ‘Can we share that value?’,” she explains. If your boss still doesn’t seem receptive, suggest revisiting the issue in a few months and then get on his calendar.

### **Practice ahead of time**

It’s important to rehearse what you will say, and not just in your head, adds Faison. “Do it out loud, practice it with someone else, record yourself, and play it back.” Listen for weaknesses in your argument or signs that you aren’t getting to the point quickly enough. Make sure to consider the conversation from your boss’s point of view, imagine the varied reactions she might have, and plan your responses. “Really think about her interests and why she would even be interested in engaging,” advises McGinn.

### **Be confident**

As you make your case, always strive for a tone of mutual respect. “I call it the Three C’s,” says Faison. “You’ve got to be calm, and conversational, and to establish an air of collaboration.” Try to avoid patterns of speech that Faison refers to as “power robbers.” Don’t make statements in the form of questions (“Would you agree I’m due for a raise?”) or qualify them (“I believe that my work has been very good...”). Instead, be direct and confident. [Positive body language](#) will also impart an air of confidence.

### **Avoid complaints and ultimatums**

Never start the conversation with a grievance or threat. “You’ll just put your boss on the defensive, which is not a good stance to take,” says McGinn. Avoid comparing yourself to colleagues or

complaining that you make less; stay positive and focus instead on how much *you* contribute. You should also avoid “implicitly or explicitly threatening to leave” as a negotiating tactic, says McGinn. At best, you’ll turn the conversation adversarial; at worse, you’ll paint yourself into a corner if you don’t get the raise.

### **Look forward, not backward**

Pitch your raise as not only recognition for past achievements, but also tacit acknowledgment that you are a dedicated team player committed to growing with the company. Lay out your contributions, then quickly pivot to what you hope to tackle next. Assure your boss that you understand his pressures and goals, and pitch your raise as a way to help him. “You’ve got to understand what is it they value, what is it that’s important to them, how are you making their lives better as well as the company’s,” says Faison.

### **If the answer is no**

If your request is declined, have a Plan B at the ready: Are there benefits you might accept in lieu of an increase in salary, such as a bonus, stock options, or more flexible work hours? And if your boss’s answer is still no, ask what it will take to shift the answer into a yes. “Ask what tasks you can take on, what changes you can make in your job that would lead to that raise,” says McGinn. You’ll show your boss that you are committed to growing within the company

### **Principles to Remember:**

#### **Do:**

- Prepare your case by gathering data on your unique contribution to the business.
- Consider your boss’s priorities and explain how you’ll help.
- Practice the conversation ahead of time.

#### **Don’t**

- Wait until review time. If you’ve taken on a new role or just notched a success, approach your boss to test the waters.
- Compare yourself to a colleague. The request is about your work and your value to the company.
- Threaten to go somewhere else.

### **Case study #1: Know your worth**

Lori Moss was enjoying a lucrative career as a luxury retail sales professional when management approached her and asked if she’d take on the additional responsibility of turning around a poorly performing division. It would involve long hours on top of her existing sales responsibilities.

After receiving the first salary offer, Lori crunched the numbers, factoring in how much time and effort she believed the turnaround would involve and how it might affect her sales business. She then

went into the counter-offer meeting with a higher figure, knowing that accepting anything less wouldn't make sense for her, financially or professionally.

She got the raise. "Negotiating upfront confirmed their confidence in my abilities," she says. Having analyzed her contributions to the business also gave her renewed confidence, which came across in the meeting. "It helps to break it all down," she says. "It helps you to see your own value."

### **Case study #2: Try to learn from the experience**

Emily Bayliss\*, vice president of operations for a pharmaceutical market intelligence firm in New Jersey, had repeatedly assumed greater responsibilities and oversight of various groups for more than a decade. But, despite receiving excellent performance reviews for her ever-expanding portfolio, she only ever received cost-of-living raises.

During a restructuring at the company, she approached her boss about a raise, pitching it as an overdue recognition of her past efforts. She documented all the work and responsibilities that she had assumed, and did research on typical industry compensation for the roles she was filling. Armed with that information, she made her case in a meeting with her boss.

But her request was declined. Upon reflection, Emily realized her mistake: she'd only focused on her past responsibilities and not on the value that she brought to the organization. "I shouldn't have just said, 'I'm doing a good job for you,' but rather, 'here's what I've been doing and here's how it's going to get you to your end goal this year and next year,'" she explains. "I didn't paint that picture clear enough for him. I assumed that he understood the value of my contributions, but you know what they say about assumptions."

Luckily, soon thereafter, Emily was approached by another company, where she was offered a higher salary and a role that better suited her strengths. She now regularly tracks the contributions she makes to profitability, so that if and when, she needs to ask for a raise, she'll have concrete evidence to make a stronger case.

*\*Not her real name*

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