



January 21 2009

## Reaching Consensus: Requesting a Raise...in this Economy

by Donny Ebenstein

*I work at a company whose huge layoffs were among recent headlines. I am long overdue for a raise, and my expenses continue to rise. However, given the layoffs and shaky economy, I don't know how to broach the subject. Any advice?*

Many conversations are difficult because the relationship between the parties is strained or there is a history of negative interactions between the individuals involved. In the situation you describe, however, the challenge is not interpersonal. You don't mention any hurt feelings or strong emotions, or a difficult relationship with your boss.

Rather, the source of the tension is structural. That is, there is a difficult reality that makes your topic hard to talk about: How do you ask for a raise, even one that is entirely justified, when the company is going through layoffs? In the current economic climate, unfortunately, difficult conversations like yours are increasingly common.

As a first step, articulate how difficult it is for you to broach the topic. Something like, "This is hard for me to raise," can foster empathy for your predicament. You also can be explicit about the structural challenge. By referring to the difficult context, you avoid implicating wrongdoing, and, in turn, a potentially defensive reaction. Something like, "This is a particularly touchy subject given everything going on in the company and in the economy," can help put both of you at ease.

Once you've initiated the conversation, resist the temptation to do most of the talking. While you might be inclined to list the reasons for deserving a raise and for needing additional monies, your focus should be on eliciting your manager's perspective. You can only do that by asking questions and listening to answers. Some helpful questions include: "Do you feel my performance has been strong? Is a raise possible? What are the barriers you see in getting a raise approved? Are there more layoffs planned? Will my role be changing as the company goes through challenging times?" and so on. You don't know what you don't know, so remember to engage your boss, let her speak, and digest her responses.

Finally, when it comes to finding an outcome that can work for both you and the company, keep an open mind. The typical solution of a strict salary increase might not work – budgets may be fixed or even reduced, and the company may have a policy of freezing all salary increases until the layoffs are completed or the economy improves, or both.

That's not to say you don't have any options. However, you and your manager may have to get creative about how to meet your request. Some options that might work include you taking on additional responsibilities in conjunction with a salary increase, non-monetary perks such as telecommuting or flexible hours, and benefits that can reduce your expenses such as a company

car or company cell phone. You and your boss should be as creative as possible in finding a solution that is mutually agreeable.

Even if you can't secure additional compensation immediately, there is value in raising the topic in a constructive way. If you don't raise the issue, it could fester and make you resentful which could affect your performance and/or your relationship with your manager. Also, raising the topic skillfully can improve your dynamic with your boss – your honesty and empathy for her predicament can go a long way towards building a healthy relationship. Last, the current economic situation won't continue forever. By raising the issue now, you set the stage for a future negotiation when things improve.

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