

How to Ask Your Boss for Feedback (and Actually Get It)

THE MANAGER TRACK · EPISODE 339 CLIFF NOTES

The main messages from the episode: why bosses stay vague, the questions that get you a real answer, how to respond to what you hear, and what to do when your boss still says "all good."

01 The core idea

"You're doing great, keep it up." If that's the only feedback you've had from your boss this year, and your rating came back as meeting expectations, you're not alone. The higher you go, the less feedback you tend to get: fewer clear metrics, and no clarity on which decisions are yours to make. Waiting for your boss to change costs you more than it costs them, so the move is to change how you ask.

46%
of US employees strongly agreed they know what's expected of them at work in 2024

56%
said the same in early 2020, before the 10-point drop

47%
of managers say more is expected of them and they're working harder than a year ago

> Sources: Gallup, "U.S. Employee Engagement Sinks to 10-Year Low," January 2025. Gartner HR survey of 2,947 employees and managers, published April 29, 2026.

02 Why bosses stay vague

THE REASON	WHAT'S GOING ON
1. They're busy	Your manager is stretched across more people and more priorities than a few years ago. Feedback for someone who's doing fine is the first thing to drop.
2. Criticism is uncomfortable	"You're doing great, all is well" is easier than the awkward conversation, especially with someone they like on a personal level.
3. They don't have a clear picture	If nobody has defined what excellent looks like in your role, your boss can't fully tell where you stand or what to compare you against.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Susan Ashford and Anne Tsui studied 387 managers and how their bosses, peers and direct reports saw them. Managers who sought negative feedback understood more accurately how others evaluated them and were seen as more effective overall. Managers who sought positive feedback were seen as less effective.

> **"None of these reasons are actually about you."**
>
> Ramona Shaw, Episode 339

> Source: Susan Ashford and Anne Tsui, "Self-Regulation for Managerial Effectiveness: The Role of Active Feedback Seeking," Academy of Management Journal, 1991.

03 Ask questions that assume there's an answer

"How am I doing?" and "Do you have any feedback for me?" invite "great," or something vague like "No, all is good." Ask something specific and forward-looking instead. Pick one for your next one-on-one.

SAY THIS

"What's one thing I could do differently that would make your job easier?"

OR THIS

"If you had to pick one area where I'm not yet at the level you need me to be, what would that be?"

OR THIS

"What would someone at the next level be doing that I'm not doing yet?"

WHY IT WORKS

You're not asking whether something is missing. You're asking what it is, which makes it easier for your boss to come up with an answer and give it to you.

04 Ask about the measure, then write it down

Ask this ahead of time, not at the end of the year. Then write down what you hear, and send a short email the same day.

SAY THIS

"When you look back at this year, what are the 3 things that would make you say I had a strong year?"

YOUR SAME-DAY EMAIL

Hi [name], thanks for the time today. Here's what I heard. These are the 3 things that would make this a strong year:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Did I get that right?

The email turns a vague conversation into something written down and gives you a reference point for your review. It matters even more when managers change, or when you don't know yet who will review your performance.

05 Ask about decision rights

A vague boss often means vague authority too. You may have been waiting for permission you didn't need, while your boss wondered why you were bringing them these decisions at all.

SAY THIS

"Which decisions do you want me to make without checking with you, and which ones do you want to see first?"

06 Ask early

January

Ask about the measure now and you have 11 months to hit it.

December

You find out what the target was after the year is already over.

BEFORE THIS YEAR'S REVIEW CLOSES

"Before we finalize this year, I want to make sure I'm clear on next year. What would make next December's review an easy conversation for both of us? What are the expectations or the metrics I need to hit?"

07 How you react decides what you hear next time

If you explain, defend or add context for the next 5 minutes, your boss learns that honest feedback costs time and energy they don't feel they have, and they'll give you less of it. In the meeting where you receive it: say thank you, ask a clarifying question if it isn't specific enough, and stop.

SAY THIS

"Thank you, that's useful. Can you give me an example of when you saw that?"

OR THIS

"Thank you, that's useful. I'm going to think about this and get back to you with a game plan."

If you disagree, think about it for a day and bring it back

THE NEXT DAY

"I thought about what you said about the launch update. I see part of it, and here's why I see it a bit differently. And here's what I'm going to change either way."

Avoid "here's where I think you're wrong." The next-day version shows you took it seriously and keeps the door open for the next round of feedback.

08 The keep, start, stop test

After any feedback conversation with your boss, can you write down these 3 things? If not, the conversation was likely too vague, and your follow-up email is where you ask for specifics or examples.

KEEP	START	STOP
One thing to keep doing, ideally a strength they called out	One thing to start doing	One thing to stop doing

MAKE IT A HABIT

Pick one of the questions and ask it in a one-on-one with your manager once a month. When asking becomes routine, it stops being awkward for both of you.

09 When you still get nothing

1. **Bring your own assessment**
   Write down how you'd rate yourself on the 3 things you think matter in your role and take it to your next one-on-one. It's much easier to react to a draft than to create one from scratch.

SAY THIS

"Here's how I rate myself on these 3 things. Where would you put me differently, or what else do you have to add?"

EXAMPLE: A MANAGER WITH A TEAM OF 8	HIS RATING	HIS BOSS'S REACTION
Delivering the 2 big projects	Strong	"I'd actually put the sales relationship higher. What I'd like more of is you bringing problems to me earlier." The first useful feedback in 6 months, in about 4 minutes.
His team's retention	Strong	
Working with the sales leaders	Okay	

2. **Go to other sources**
   Ask your peers, your stakeholders and people in other teams the same specific questions. They see things your boss doesn't, since your boss isn't in every meeting.

3. **Use the data you already have**
   Did your project land on time? Did your team's numbers move? Did people outside your team ask for you? That's feedback too. Track it and bring it to your year-end review.

10 Your worksheet

My question for the next one-on-one: ☐ One thing to do differently ☐ One area not yet at the level

☐ The next level ☐ 3 things for a strong year ☐ Decision rights

The 3 things that matter in my role: 1. _____ **My rating** _____

2. _____ **My rating** _____

3. _____ **My rating** _____

Decisions I can make on my own _____

After the conversation: keep _____

Start _____ **Stop** _____

Done: ☐ Same-day email sent ☐ Said thank you, didn't defend ☐ Asked 1 other source

☐ Logged my data

Recap

THE MOVE	WHAT TO DO
Ask specific questions	Ask what it is, not whether there's anything. Forward-looking, one area at a time.
Ask about the measure	The 3 things that make a strong year, confirmed in a same-day email.
Ask about decision rights	Which decisions are yours, and which your boss wants to see first.
Don't defend in the moment	Thank you, a clarifying question, then stop. Bring disagreement back the next day.
Still nothing?	Bring your own assessment, ask other sources and use your own data.

11 Try this week

1. **Ask about Q1**
   In your next one-on-one, ask your boss which 3 things would make them say you had a strong Q1 of 2027. Send the follow-up email the same day.

Keep going

Whatever you want from your boss, your own team wants from you: clear measures, decision rights and specific feedback without having to ask for it. The Leadership Accelerator is Archova's 12-week program for new and early-stage managers, including managing up and the conversations nobody taught you.

archova.org/leadership-accelerator **Book a Leadership Strategy Call** **Watch Episode 339**