

## Leadership Barometer 114 What Your Manager Thinks About You

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Sometimes it is easy to interpret what your manager thinks about you. The manager may be an open book and be totally transparent. In fact, you may be one of the unlucky people who wish their manager would be less vocal. You need to use all your senses and skill to interpret what is going on in your manager's mind.

This article is intended to shed some light on a delicate subject and give you some tools to use.

### Watch the body language

We communicate emotional issues much more through body language than through words (more than five times the amount). If you have not been exposed to the subtle clues to communicating through body language, get some training. There are numerous free resources online. Just type "Body Language" in any good search engine.

The caveat with reading body language is that you should avoid taking everything literally. Use the 5 "C's" method of identifying significant body language patterns:

1. **Context** - What is the background activity that is happening?
2. **Clusters** - Several discrete signals mean more than a single gesture.
3. **Congruence** - Do words and body language agree? If not, probe for reasons.
4. **Consistency** - What is the baseline behavior versus specific body language?
5. **Culture** - Consider the social norms of the person.

### Ask more questions

Rather than advocating your position on issues, probe and ask a lot of questions. The Socratic Method is a great way to get your manager to open up about what

he or she is thinking. Ask reasonable open-ended questions that form a pattern by which you can understand what your manager really thinks.

### **Listen to the tone of voice**

The tone of voice contains about 40% of total communication. You can detect anxiety or anger by noting whether the pitch is either much higher than usual (typical for anxiety) or much lower than usual (often the case if the manager is angry).

Cadence is also another clue. If the manager is speaking faster than usual, it normally signals anxiety, while an uncharacteristically slow cadence is often an expression of extreme frustration.

### **Be alert to the grapevine**

If your manager is having issues with you, sometimes the information will leak out to the grapevine. While it is wrong to take all rumors and gossip at face value, it would be wrong to ignore signals coming from peers. If something sounds ominous, get some time with the manager and check things out using open-ended questions.

### **Cultivate a strong relationship with the Administrative Assistant**

The administrative assistant to the manager often has inside knowledge. Personal integrity will prevent this person from telling you information directly, but if you have built up a good relationship with this person, there are many subtle ways a personal assistant can discretely let you know when there are issues.

It is always a good strategy to be helpful (but not patronizing) with the Administrative Assistant to the manager.

### **Communicate often**

Keep the lines of communication as open as you can. One hint is to find the manager's preferred mode of communication and use that most often. For example, I had one manager who preferred the use of voice mail. He found that more convenient than e-mail or texting. I would communicate with him daily on the voice mail for decisions, etc. I would downplay e-mail or real-time texting.

A different manager was strong on e-mail, so the majority of strategy questions went out in that form.

### **Look for shifts in communication patterns**

It is a danger signal if the manager changes frequency of contact with you. It may be easily explained by a peak workload situation, an upcoming trip, a special project, or several other logical shifts.

The point is to find out if the change could be due to some frustration the manager has with you that is not being shared. The manager may actually be avoiding contact with you. If so, you need to understand why. Don't just assume it is because the person is busy.

### **Practice reflective listening**

When interfacing with the manager directly, it is a great opportunity to practice reflective listening. Human beings generally have a more difficult time with listening than with any other form of communication. That is because when we are "listening" much of our mental processes are tied up preparing to speak.

The technique of reflective listening forces you to really internalize the message, which is critical if you want to pick up on frustrations the manager is having with you.

One caution; reflective listening can be annoying if it is applied in a cumbersome way. You need to be trained on how to use this technique smoothly and naturally for it to be effective.

### **Discuss any frustrations you have**

Opening up about your own frustrations with other people or even the manager can help get honest dialog going. That is healthy because it establishes a safe environment for honest communication.

I remember telling my manager once, "If you are half as frustrated with me as I am with Frank, I am in a lot of trouble." His silence let me know that he was indeed frustrated with my performance at that time.

### **Volunteer to help out**

Stepping forward to help out is a great way to let your manager know you care about improving conditions. That may open up some lines of communication that were previously blocked.

### **Conclusion**

Your manager is a human being (hopefully) and will often make a decision to vent frustrations about you to others rather than discuss them with you. Follow the ideas above and you will have a better track record of getting more accurate information directly from your manager.

*The preceding information was adapted from the book **Leading with Trust is like Sailing Downwind**, by Robert Whipple. It is available on [www.leadergrow.com](http://www.leadergrow.com).*

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