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# The Two Messages To Give Your Manager

Think About These Whenever You Interact with Your Boss



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*This article is one of a series about how to build a relationship with your manager that gets you what you want on the job when you want it.*

*The content is based on [Help Your Boss Help You](#) by Ken Kousen, published by The Pragmatic Bookshelf. Hint: read to the end of the article for a promo code.*

Before we get to the main topic for this post, I want to mention that the people at [Medium](#) sent me an email containing this message:

★



GREAT WORK

## Kenneth Kousen, you're a top writer in the topic of Business.

Your writing is popular with readers — keep up the good work! The Business topic page and your profile will now highlight you as a top writer, as well.



My reactions to this were:

- Hey, cool!
- Wow, that must be a really low bar.
- My first few managers would laugh and laugh.
- This award and \$5 will get me a hot, venti, skinny vanilla latte at Starbucks, which cost me \$4.75 + tax last time I ordered one.

- I can't believe I'm accustomed to spending \$5 for a cup of coffee, but now I want one. Sigh.

I've been collecting credentials my whole life, so I like them, but I'm also keenly aware of their limitations. I promise I won't take myself any more seriously than you do.

## The Two Messages

With that in mind, let's discuss *The Two Messages*. A running theme of these posts is that at work you want to create a relationship with your manager based on *constructive loyalty*. The loyalty part means your manager helps you in your career, gets you the resources you need, and stands up for you when problems arise. From your manager's side, loyalty means you do your job to the best of your ability, let them know when you find issues that need work, and support them in their decisions (at least publicly).

You can view the whole relationship as a series of interactions with two main goals, colloquially expressed as:

- *I got this*, and
- *I got your back*.

Every time you deal with your manager, keep these two goals in mind.

You can read in-depth about The Two Messages in my book:

Help Your Boss Help You	
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Develop more productive habits in dealing with your manager. As a professional in the business world, you care about...

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## Taking Responsibility

The “I got this” message doesn’t mean you know how to do every step of every task that’s assigned to you. Believe it or not, most managers understand that you’re not an expert in everything. The only way you can be sure you know all the details of an assignment is if you’ve done very similar assignments many times before, *and you don’t hire professionals for that.*

To emphasize that point for a moment, professionals are hired not just for what they know, but for what they can learn to do. Especially in the IT world where I live, techniques and technologies change all the time, so you’re always adapting to changing circumstances. There’s a saying in the IT industry:

| *Today’s best practices are tomorrow’s maintenance problems.*

Ask a Java developer about EJBs (especially version 1.0), or Struts, or even Java Data Objects (which is still an active specification, though now it’s called Apache JDO), if they can even remember back that far. Ask anyone who dealt with XML, which, believe it or not, used to be popular. People used to play with XML Schemas, used XSLT for stylesheet transformations, and implemented SOAP-based web services, which still exist in more organizations than you would expect.

I'll stop before this list degenerates into a competition about primitive punch \* card editors and give the last word to this classic XKCD cartoon about coding with butterflies:

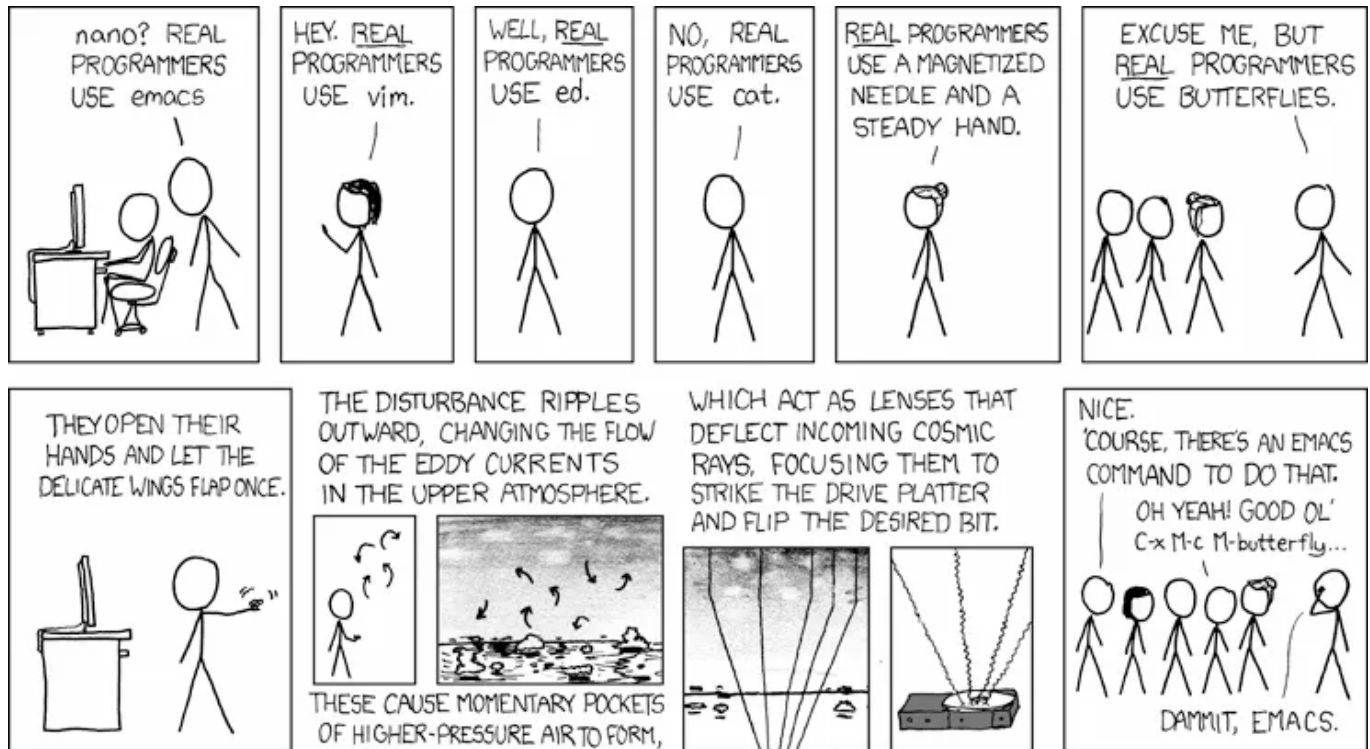


Image courtesy of [xkcd.com](https://xkcd.com). Note: I think there's a VSCode plugin similar to that Emacs mode.

Getting back to the main point, you can't be expected to know everything and the things you do know keep changing. We're all constantly learning and adjusting how we do our jobs.

So if your boss gives you an assignment, and you both understand you don't know how to do every detail, what are you really being asked? It's all about *taking responsibility* for the task.

I like to use a housework analogy to illustrate the point, though it's actually the opposite of what you want to do. Early in my marriage my wife and I went through an informal division of labor regarding housework. I didn't want to do laundry, so when I was forced to do it, I asked for explicit,

detailed explanations for every step and somehow still managed to mess it up. After all, I didn't want to do it. That passive-aggressive approach was a complete abdication of responsibility.

(Fortunately, I learned my lesson, and we're still together 30+ years later.)

When you say the words "I got this" to your manager, you are saying:

- I'll figure out how to do the task.
- I'll identify the parts that I don't understand and do my best to fix that.
- I'll ask for help when I need it, keeping in mind it's still my responsibility to get the job done.

That's taking responsibility. *I got this* takes a degree of self-confidence to express, especially when you are aware of what you don't know, but it's a key component of success. Your manager needs to be able to trust you with any task they give you. You don't have to lie about your abilities, but you do have to show enough belief in your own skills to convince the manager that you'll find a way to get the job done.

## We're a Team

The "I got your back" message means that, to the outside world at least, we're a team. That doesn't mean you never argue with your boss. Most managers want honest feedback from technical experts, as long as it's given in a way that doesn't threaten the loyalty relationship. But loyalty is more important to managers than it is to technical contributors because managers have to convince others to follow their decisions even though they're not doing the

actual work. You demonstrate loyalty by backing up the decisions of your manager, even (and especially) when you don't agree with them.

*I got your back* is easy to do. You just use the word “we” a lot. To choose a nightmare scenario, say you're on a project that turns out to be a disaster, both over budget and underperforming. Now here comes your boss's boss, saying that they talked to your boss already, and now they want to talk to all the manager's direct reports and get your feedback about what went wrong.

During this meeting, your manager is sitting in their office, terrified. They know the project failed, and now their own boss is interviewing all the manager's reports, and your manager has no idea what you're going to say.

You are free to criticize the schedule, the budget, the hardware, the software, or even the unrealistic and shifting expectations of the client. The one person you *don't* throw under the bus is your own manager. Whenever that person comes up, use the word “we.”

*We* talked about how to approach this. Then *we* decided on a strategy, but it didn't work. So *we* met again, and replanned and tried a different approach, but that didn't work either. (And so on.)

You're being honest because you really are a team. Everyone — especially the boss's boss — will know who actually made the decisions, but even so, the overall effort was performed by the team. What you are doing now is demonstrating loyalty, and you're doing it to a higher-level manager who will likely recognize it and appreciate it for what it is. After all, your boss's boss already knows your boss. Now they're going to know you, too, so you might as well try to satisfy both parties.

While your boss may or may not know what you did, and may or may not express their appreciation later, you can be sure that if you do the opposite, they'll hear about it. If you attack your own boss, especially to their immediate supervisor, you'll destroy the loyalty relationship. Even the act of saying criticisms out loud affects how you feel about the other person, so be careful. Unless you plan to leave the next day, there will be consequences.

## Using the Two Messages

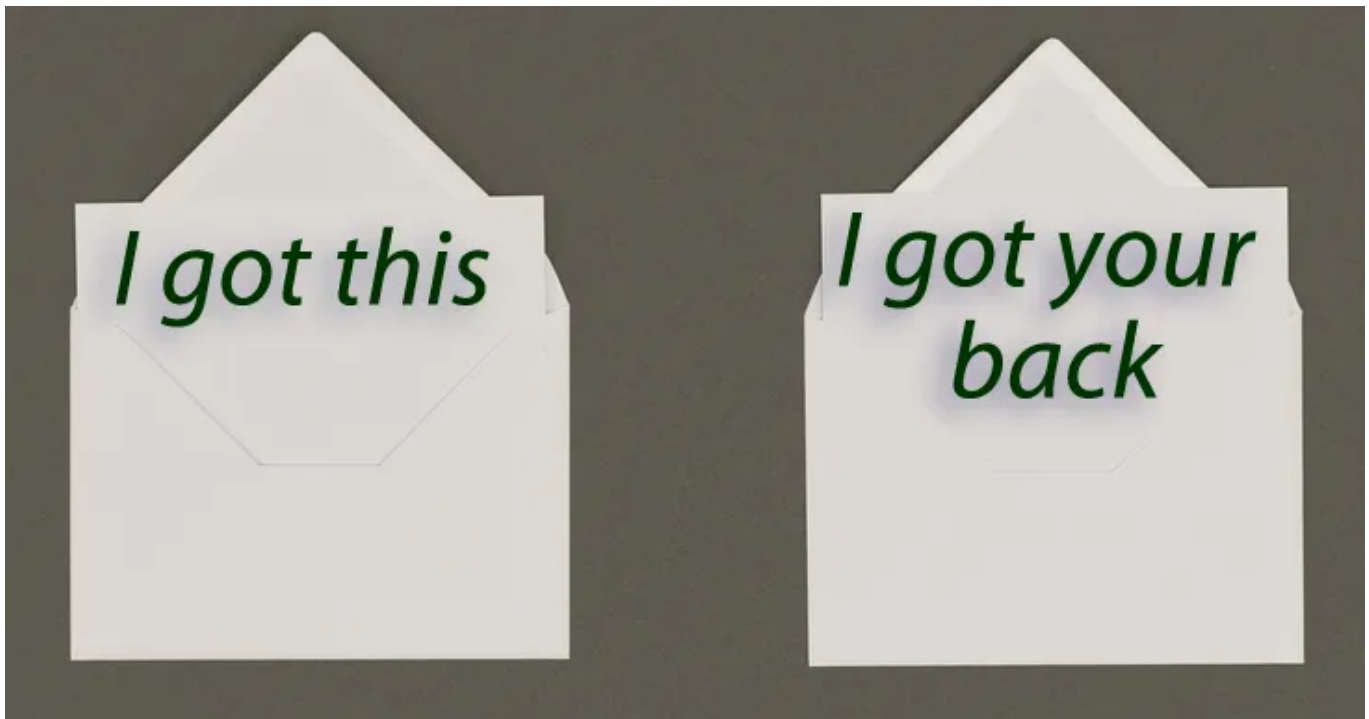


Image from [depositphotos.com](https://depositphotos.com)

Managers want to trust their own employees. We also want to trust them, and it's easy to argue that trust needs to be earned. Why should you trust them, when they're not necessarily trustworthy?

The key is to remember that this is a professional relationship.



You're not expected to trust your manager the way you would a friend, and certainly not the way you would a family member. You're only trusting them to do right by you on the job, and in response, you're going to do right by them. The easiest way to give managers what they need is to send them the messages "I got this" and "I got your back." The first gives them the confidence they need to assign you the projects you want. The second lets them know that when things go bad, you'll be there in the trenches with them.

Constructive loyalty is hard to find, and when managers discover that you're willing to give it to them, they'll want to keep you around and keep you happy.

Privately, you can always push back, as we talk about in this article:

Pushing Back: Lessons from the Prisoner's Dilemma

Apply the IPD Solution to Employee/Manager Relationships

medium.com

You're free to disagree with your manager. Such conflict is inevitable, because your goals and incentives are different. But if you can build a professional relationship with your boss based on the principles of constructive loyalty, you'll go a long way toward making your manager your ally. And having your manager as an ally will go a long way to making you successful at work.

Trust me on this. After all, I'm a top business writer on Medium, so I've got that going for me. Which is nice. 😊

Through October 31, 2021 you can use promo code **boss\_35** to save 35% on the ebook version of *Help Your Boss Help You* by Ken Kousen, published by *The Pragmatic Bookshelf*. Promo codes are not valid on prior purchases.

<https://pragprog.com/titles/kkmanage/help-your-boss-help-you/>

## More Wisdom From Help Your Boss Help You

If you enjoyed this article, you may also enjoy the following articles, which are based on the concepts from *Help Your Boss Help You* by Ken Kousen:

When Your Boss Is a Micromanager

Is There Hope For Ending Micromanagement and Building Trust?

medium.com

Pushing Back: Lessons from the Prisoner's Dilemma

Apply the IPD Solution to Employee/Manager Relationships

medium.com

Hacks: Your Boss Is Not Your Friend

What Do Popular TV Shows Have to Do with Your Work Relationships?

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