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# Never Postpone a Meeting

A Lesson from My One Good Manager



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133



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I've had many bosses in my career, but only *one* good one. Here's one of the lessons he taught me that changed my career and, arguably, my life.

📖 This article is part of a series of posts about managing your manager, based on the book *Help Your Boss Help You*.

I spent many years working for a small division of a large company. After eight years there, I switched to a new group with a new manager, who I'll call Dave. Early in my time in the new group, he gave me a project to work on, and we scheduled a meeting for that Friday to report on progress.

Thursday afternoon he dropped by my office to remind me of our meeting the next day.

"Do you mind if we postpone it until Monday?" I asked.

"Why?" Dave replied.

I hemmed and hawed, giving excuses about needing to wrap up a couple of issues before we met. The truth was that I hadn't made much progress and I

didn't want to admit it. I didn't want to disappoint him, and I didn't want to receive the inevitable criticism that I felt I deserved for not getting further in the project.

Dave immediately saw through that and rejected my request.

"No," he said. "We'll meet as planned. If you haven't accomplished what you hoped, tell me that and we'll talk about it."

I reluctantly agreed. When we met, I explained what had happened — I'd been making progress, but had encountered a problem and gotten blocked. Then I got distracted by other issues and hadn't resolved the original problem, so it looked like I hadn't made any progress.

He understood. We brainstormed about the problem and came up with a few possible solutions. At one point, however, he made a few key points unrelated to the actual issue but important to our future relationship:

1. Postponing our meeting over the weekend *wouldn't have made any difference*, or at least not enough to matter. I would not have resolved my technical issues without help.
2. *Postponing meetings is habit forming*. If you postpone the first one by a few days, then the next one is a week late; the next one is a couple of weeks late, and then more.
3. It's always better to *know about problems early* when there's still time and money in the budget to deal with them.

In principle, I knew all that, but this was the first time a manager made those statements out loud and meant them. He also, to my considerable

surprise, didn't criticize me or condemn me for not having made enough progress. Instead, we had an honest discussion about the issues I'd identified and figured out how to address them.

## The Brighter Side



I admit that in this case, I got lucky. I didn't realize it at the time, but my boss was the best manager I was going to have in my entire career. During most of our first year together he spent a lot of time helping me break bad habits I'd acquired during my early years in the company. Those bad habits (like postponing potentially uncomfortable meetings) served their purpose for a while, which is why I developed them in the first place. They kept me safe when I was vulnerable early in my career, but they were short-term fixes that caused me long-term problems.

That conversation changed my career. Now I try not to ever postpone a progress meeting, even if I haven't made any progress (shudder). I haven't always been able to live up to that goal, and I haven't always had managers who handled the situations as well as Dave did. Frankly, most of my managers fell far short of that behavior, and I've taken plenty of heat for not making the progress they expected. Still, I've benefitted far more than I've lost. For every unpleasant meeting I've had, I've had a dozen where my fears were far greater than the reality, and — in many of them — the resulting meeting resolved the issues holding me back with requiring me to sacrifice my own time and energy in a desperate attempt to avoid criticism.

In fact, I had one of those meetings this week. I'm working on a new writing project. I got stuck and didn't want to meet with my editor (Hi Margaret!). I nearly canceled our scheduled meeting half a dozen times, right up to an hour before it happened. Instead, I forced myself to attend. As you probably expect, it was fine. We talked about the problems holding me back and came up with several options to fix them. It got me moving again, which was the real goal anyway.

My suggestion, therefore, is never to postpone a progress meeting. Yes, it may be uncomfortable, but it probably won't go as badly as you think, and it may actually help. At the very least, the weekend you save will be your own.

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