

The New York Times

The New York Times

Sunday, July 15, 2007

Pages 18-25
Late, Pages 26-28

SundayBusiness

L1

Section 3

Jobs

The New York Times

CAREER COUCH

EILENE ZIMMERMAN

To Showcase Your Skills, Seize the Initiative

Q. Much of the time at work, you have nothing to do or are occupied with tedious busy-work. How can you let your boss know that you are bored and feeling irrelevant?

A. Whatever you do, don't say, "I'm bored." It could put an already busy manager in the position of having to create things for you to do, and you may end up doing even more work that is unfulfilling.

Your manager is much more likely to be sympathetic and appreciative if you come up with specific suggestions about how you can make a bigger contribution at your company.

"Think about what you're good at, where your strengths lie and about your long-term career goals," advised Kirsten Dixon, co-author of "Career Distinction: Stand Out by Building Your Brand" and a partner in the Reach Branding Club, an online service that offers career and business coaching.

"Then look around and see what needs to be done, what projects are ongoing, even if they aren't a part of your regular job," she said.

Learn about both your company and its industry, because a knowledge of trends lets you identify areas where you might be able to help the company grow.

"Understand where your job — and your manager's job — fits into the company's goals," said Paul Platten, an organizational psychologist and director of the human capital group at Watson Wyatt Worldwide, a consulting firm based in Washington.

"People tend to look at their job as a series of tasks, but it's more effective to approach your boss if you understand how you can be most helpful to him," Mr. Platten said.

Create a list of ways your time could be better spent — activities that either bring in revenue or can help those who bring in revenue. Include projects you want to lead or join. Offer to manage a high-maintenance client or look for areas in the company where you can save money or streamline procedures — and write up a proposal to do that, said Debra Condren, a business psychologist and career coach based in New York and San Francisco.

Whatever course you take, walk in to your boss's office with solutions rather than com-

plaints.

Q. Will your boss resent your acknowledgment that you haven't been busy?

A. As long as you have the right attitude, don't worry about looking bad, said Michael Stallard, president of EPluribus Partners, a leadership training firm based in Greenwich, Conn., and author of "Fired Up or Burned Out: How to Reignite Your Team's Passion, Creativity and Productivity." Most managers are happy to see that an employee is showing initiative, he said.

Q. How long should you wait before speaking to your boss?

A. If you've just started a new job, you should probably wait at least several months. But as long as you are established in your position, whenever you feel you aren't being challenged is the right time to approach your boss, said Richard Wellins, an organizational psychologist and executive coach at DDI, a human resources consulting firm based in Pittsburgh.

But first, assess your workload over several months, to ensure that your conclusion isn't rash, said Ronnie Moore, president of Moore Communications, a communications training firm in Atlanta and Los Angeles, and author of "Why Did I Say That? Communicating to Keep Your Credibility, Your Cool and Your Cash."

Take into consideration that certain industries are cyclical, Ms. Moore said. For example, she said: "If you work in the retail industry, don't have this conversation right after Christmas, because everyone is slow, not just you. But if you are working in the hospitality industry in the middle of summer and you're not busy, something is wrong."

Q. Is there a way to find or create work on your own, so that you involve your boss either minimally or not at all?

A. Yes. You can use the downtime to further your professional development by participating in internal workshops or classes, said Noah Blumenthal, president of Leading Principles Inc., an executive coaching firm in New York City and author of "You're Addicted to You: Why It's So Hard to Change — and What You Can Do About It."



Chris Reed

Volunteer for task forces or initiatives within your company, said Elaine J. Eisenman, dean of Babson Executive Education at Babson College in Wellesley, Mass. Examples might include making the workplace healthier or more environmentally friendly.

And if you can't come up with anything, challenge yourself to become the best at whatever you are doing.

"You're not going to be photocopying forever, so while you are, become queen of the paper jam," Ms. Dixon suggested.

Q. You've had the "I'm ready to take on more" conversation several times, but nothing has changed. Could it be a sign you are in the wrong job?

A. Yes, and staying too long in a job where you don't feel relevant takes a toll, said Rob Bennett, who worked for years in a well-paying corporate communications job where he didn't have enough to do.

"You go to bed at night thinking you're aren't being productive, you're not making contacts and your professional skills are eroding," he said.

Mr. Bennett eventually left his job in order to write, and now publishes the Financial Freedom Blog, which provides information about investing and early retirement.

Mr. Wellins said the warning signs can include a manager who doesn't support or encourage you and colleagues who don't look up to you or come to you with questions. And finally, he said, "if you feel in your heart you aren't growing and learning, you need to find something else." □