

Tips for Relating to Your Boss By Fritz Rumpel

If you're having trouble getting your boss to understand you, you're not alone.

In fact, one of the greatest barriers to having a productive relationship with supervisors is lack of communication. Having AD/HD can complicate matters, significantly affecting your ability to communicate effectively with – and therefore get along with – your boss. Unfortunately, you can not assume that someone in a managerial position has effective communication skills – people get to their positions of authority for all kinds of reasons, and being a good communicator is not necessarily one of them. Therefore, it's up to you to be an effective communicator and take initiative. Following are tips for helping you build a better relationship with your boss.

First Thing's First

Your relationship with your boss actually begins prior to your first day on the job. Before you begin a new job, you must decide (and no one else should do this for you) what, if anything, you are going to tell your supervisor about your AD/HD. The decision you make and the approach you take will lay the groundwork for your subsequent relationship and work experience. If you do choose to disclose, you must first consider when you should do it. During the interview? After you're offered the job? Your first day at work? The answer depends on several factors.

When you're applying for a job, you need to find out everything you can about the position, even in advance of the interview. Let's say you've responded to an ad in the paper for a clerk-typist position. You are contacted for an interview. You should ask for a detailed job description (because classified ads usually don't tell you the whole story of the requirements of the job). Some employers, usually larger ones, can supply you with one. Others can not.

If that's the case, then during the interview you should ask the interviewer to explain the position in detail. One way to get the ball rolling is to ask: "Could you describe a typical work day for the person in this position?" Another important request is: "Would you please show me where I would be working?" You want this information because you need to know what impact your disorder will have on the successful completion of each function of the job. Once you know that, you can determine what accommodations you may need. Perhaps you have extreme difficulties working in an open space environment, for instance, and need quiet to concentrate on your work. An accommodation could be a private space in a quiet location.

The question is, how do you broach the subject? This is when having good communication skills is key. Let's assume you've been offered the job but you haven't

yet said anything about having AD/HD. You realize that you need the accommodation of a private space in which to do your work. Here's one way to deal with it:

MS. BROWN (EMPLOYER): Lynn, I'd like to offer you the clerk-typist position. I think you'd be a tremendous asset to this department.

LYNN: That's great news, Ms. Brown. When would you like me to start?

MS. BROWN: In two weeks.

LYNN: Fine. I'll be here. I can't tell you how much this opportunity means to me. And I think I can really help get the workload under control in the department. I think I could be even more productive for you if you did one thing for me.

MS. BROWN: What do you mean?

LYNN: I'm at my most productive when I'm in a quiet working environment.

MS. BROWN: Aren't we all?

LYNN: Yes, but in my case it's really essential. You see, I'm requesting an accommodation for my condition. I have attention deficit disorder.

MS. BROWN: Oh!

LYNN: I can assure you it won't affect the quality of my work as long as I have a quiet area to work in. You've impressed upon me the importance of producing quality work and, in all honesty, this is how I can be the most productive worker for you.

MS. BROWN: Well, I don't know much about this attention deficit business.

LYNN: I do, and I can guarantee you it won't be a problem. You've been very descriptive in telling me about this job and after looking at everything, I know I can do it. But I can do it even better if you provide me with a private space where I won't be distracted; where I can really be productive.

MS. BROWN: Well, I suppose we can try it.

LYNN: Thank you, Ms. Brown. You won't be disappointed.

If you decide to disclose, you can adapt this approach to the interview – before you're offered the job – or when you start work. The key points to keep in mind are:

- You want to stress that the accommodation isn't only for you but for your employer as well. That's why it's essential to emphasize being a "more productive worker for you." There's got to be something in this for the boss or she will be resentful.
- You have to show you know what you're talking about. Don't expect the supervisor to know anything about AD/HD, much less how to accommodate it. You must soothe the employer ("I can assure you...").
- If you decide to request an accommodation, don't be vague. Give a specific solution or, even better, offer two or three options. And by the way, if you aren't sure about accommodations in the workplace, call the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) at 800-526-7234 for advice. The human factors consultants at JAN can give you examples of how other persons with AD/HD were accommodated to perform specific jobs.

Timing is Everything: Choosing the Best Time to Disclose

When is the best time for disclosure? A lot will depend on your employer. Just like researching the job and your accommodation needs, you need to research your potential employer. At the least, when you're contacted for an interview, ask for information such as general brochures, annual reports, or any other publications the company produces. If it's a large outfit, it might have a Web page you can look at on the Internet. (If you don't have access to the Internet, try your local library.) Also, ask your friends and acquaintances if they know anything about this employer.

Then, you need to find out what the company's official policy is and its actual attitude (they may differ) toward hiring persons with disabilities. Does the employer have an affirmative action policy? Does it extend to persons with disabilities? If the answer is yes, then you can be more secure talking about your accommodation needs in the interview. This employer may have experience accommodating individuals with disabilities.

If the answer is no, then you have to work harder at getting a feel for the organization. Try to work in questions like: "How would you characterize your hiring policies?" Listen carefully to what the person says and watch how he says it. If you get the sense the individual does not take this kind of question very seriously (usually by giving you a short answer and/or an odd look), then you may want to wait until you are offered the job to disclose.

Then the question becomes, now that I've got the job, should I tell or should I wait until I'm actually working? The short answer is that bosses, as a rule, don't like surprises. The sooner you discuss it – in positive terms (see the dialogue on page 30) – the better. However, you may feel you can better explain your accommodation needs in the workplace itself. If that is the case, you should wait. But you don't want to wait too long.

This leads to a very important issue: the worst time to disclose. The worst time you can disclose your AD/HD is when you're about to be terminated. The second worst time is when you are given a negative performance evaluation. Typically, however, this is when most individuals with hidden disabilities (i.e., bipolar disorder, epilepsy, learning disability, AD/HD, etc.) reveal their impairment, attributing their poor job performance to their condition. Employers are very suspicious about such claims and wonder, "Why didn't you tell us before?" And if you file a lawsuit against the employer, the odds are against you: A study of Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) court cases showed that employers win 92 percent of the time. (Mental & Physical Disability Law Reporter, 1998).

Your goal is to never get to the point at which you're about to be fired due to your disability.

Don't Be Shy: Request Specific Instructions

Another important step you can take is to request specific instructions from your boss. This means if the boss gives you a vague instruction, you ask for clarification.

Boss: "I want that done by the middle of next week."

You: "Could you please tell me which day and by what time? I'm much better with specific deadlines."

Boss: "Oh, sure. Let's say Wednesday by 3:00 P.M."

It also means that when you're having a conversation and your supervisor says something that you don't understand, don't pretend you know what he or she means. Clearly state: "I'm not sure what you mean. Could you explain that?"

How does having AD/HD impact your relationship with your boss? If you think your condition will affect your performance of the responsibilities of the job and you decide to disclose, you must convey to your boss that you can do the job with the right accommodations. Do your research on your needs and communicate them in a positive light. Effective communication and initiative are your keys to developing a good working relationship with your supervisor.

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References

Anonymous. (1998). Study Finds Employers Win Most ADA Title I Individual and Administrative Complaints. *Mental and Physical Disability Law Reporter*, 22(3), 403-407.

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