Show Me the Money (or how to ask for a raise)

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In a better economy, technicians usually found that they could achieve truly significant salary “bumps” only by changing jobs. It just seemed to be easier to demand more in this situation. But with a dismal non-recovery, few people want to throw themselves into the market and yet, everyone wishes to see their salaries grow along with their workload and responsibility. It is a particularly difficult pill to swallow as you watch colleagues retire or be laid off, you have to absorb more work, but you aren’t compensated for this.

Many of my clients tell me that their process is the “hope for change” method. They hope management will just grant them a large raise with their annual review. This involves an assumption that the manager just knows how great they are and that he/she can’t wait to reward them.

I draw now on a favorite coaching question, “how’s that working for you?” Even in a good job market, people who rely on the “hope for change” model only really received more when there was a threat (implied or real) that the employee was ready to leave for more money. Though it may have appeared that this method worked in some cases, ultimatums rarely leave either side feeling that a win/win has been achieved. This technique can even backfire. If your manager really doesn’t believe in the raise, you may find yourself on the target layoff list. At the very least, he will expect you to prove your value after the fact.

For those employing the direct approach, too many couch their request in terms of why they need the raise. New expenses, comparison to salaries of other people and the length of time since the last raise, are all approaches that have been tried and failed. “But I really need more money,” you might say.

The answer is harsh, but true – your boss DOES NOT CARE. Just as with any negotiation, as when you negotiate with a vendor (remember?) your manager wants you as cheap as possible. In fact, he wants a top technician for no money. Everything else is a negotiation. The company does not care that:

- You have a new child
- You suddenly have high college expenses
- You now have elderly parents to support
- Your bills have gotten out of control

In one way, they do care, but it isn’t for a good reason. Being unable to manage your expenses raises a lot of red flags. It is a negative, whether they fear loss of your complete attention or are concerned that you might be tempted to
embezzle. And besides, they really don’t care that you need money; the why is irrelevant. It simply is not about your needs or desires.

If this is not the way to plead your case, what is? Giving you a raise (keeping you happy) must be in the interest of your employer. In most cases, your manager will have to argue your case to higher levels, so he must believe that you have established a good case.

To build your case:
1. Ask for a raise after a particularly great performance review or the completion of a major project. (value)
2. Quantify your value to the company. If you have saved or made them money, document the facts.
3. Document your differentiators. How do you compare to others at your level? It isn’t about what they make but about what you do relative to your peers. How innovative are you? How does you communicating (writing/speaking) and teamwork compare to others?
4. If you know that you are below market, bring documentation of this. If not, don’t despair. This is only one possible part of your case.
5. Document your value to the business; institutional knowledge is invaluable; training a new hire takes time. At the same time, be prepared to demonstrate that knowledge and explain how you have gone the extra mile – mentored someone, creating training, automated some procedure.
6. Collect “kudo” letters for these meetings
7. Determine what you will accept in a raise. In most cases, raises are finite – you might want a 50% raise, but you are unlikely to get it. If little money is available now, ask to be reconsidered in six months.
8. Finally, schedule time with your manager. Treat this as a business proposal.

If you don’t have a case after reviewing this list, then, perhaps you need to wait until you have a case before presenting it.

All of this is much easier if you have skillfully highlighted your accomplishments all along, both to your manager and those above that level. Managers like to be “good guys,” rewarding their people. Make sure you are on the radar with them, so your name comes forward. Finally, be sure you truly believe in your case, so you can sell it. Every day is a chance to shine and be recognized; make the most of it.

Stay tuned next month for another edition of “Your Career Coach.”