

Help! Save My Career!

by Donald Asher, America's Job Search Guru

(this article originally appeared in *USAirways Magazine*)

Dear Guru Don:

Just a quick question: You recently had a great article on how to negotiate for salary. Under what circumstances should a person *not* negotiate for salary, or are there any industries where this is uncool?

Sign me,

Just Curious

Dear Curious:

I can think of two industries that normally do not negotiate entry salaries, and they are investment banking and venture capital. You generally take the offer and go forward. Also, some entry-level positions in glamour industries, such as major league sports, where there are 100 other people willing to take the job for free if you don't want it. Readers, are there any more? Let me know.

Even in these industries, however, it is just fine to ask these questions: "I really had in mind more than that. What can we do?" "Under what circumstances have you made a higher offer to a candidate?" "What's the difference between me and *that* candidate?" Politely inquiring won't offend anybody, anywhere.

My best wishes for your continued success.

Dear Guru Don:

My boss is an albatross around my neck, and I fear I cannot get promoted here because of him. I am a regional merchandiser for a tire chain. He is the director of regional operations. We're the only two regional employees. Everyone else is either franchise level or corporate. I am responsible for store appearance, seasonal product mix, and signage. He is responsible for all financial reporting, "standardization" (which in our company means all corporate-mandated policies and procedures), and franchisee relations. I have to report to him, but he has no idea what I do. That'd be fine if he'd leave me alone, but then he sticks his head into my business and that's when the trouble begins.

I have no real authority over franchisees. I have to persuade them to go along with our promotions and programs. Once in awhile my boss will force a franchisee to get in line, but mostly he is just worried about the financials. So I am out there trying to forecast tire demand after gas went through the roof. I said to myself, hey, people are going to drive their trucks less and their cars more, so we need to tweak the product mix. He says, no, the big money comes from the big tires, so let's make the stores keep plenty in stock. So even after I had all the stores

in line with my plan, he calls every one of them up and says they'd be foolish to change based on his analysis of past sales.

Well, it turns out I was right on, and he was dead wrong. But then he blames *me* because the stores got off of optimum product mix. See what I mean? I can't win.

This is just one example. He tells the stores to ignore my input, and then tells corporate I'm not doing a great job. He's a lifer, so there's no chance I can wait him out. What's your advice?

Sign me,

Tired Out Tammi

Dear Tammi,

You've forgotten the first rule of boss management: Keep your boss happy. You've even forgotten who your real boss is. Your boss is not the franchisee stores or corporate headquarters, but this regional manager. You want this guy to leave you alone, but that's clearly not working out. You need to work *more* closely with him, not less. You need to sell him on your ideas before you put them out on the road without his endorsement. If you don't have his buy in, he's going to sabotage you every time. If you have to, convince him that your ideas actually came from him. That's boss management.

On the other hand, you may not be able to succeed at this. In that case it may be time to get another job. Forget trying to fix this guy if you can't win him over. Before you look at a competitor or a new line of work, why don't you try to get a corporate headquarters job, or jump into your best-run store? Corporate would probably offer the better long-term advancement potential.

You have to do a little image management, too. Develop your own connections at headquarters. Try to deliver your own reports instead of filtering everything through your troglodyte boss.

There's one rule you should know: Never go over your boss's head about a work issue without explicit permission. That's a Top Ten Career Commandment. But there are ways to jump org chart levels without breaking this rule! Here's how to get around any deadwood boss:

- Get on a special project team or task force. That gives you access to others outside of your direct reporting structure. This is good for image management and for learning about opportunities elsewhere in the company.
- Wait until he goes on vacation, and then schmooze up some connections at HQ. I'd be at HQ the entire time he's out on break, trying to find a back channel for information flows. You want some eyes and ears, and a mouthpiece, representing your interests at HQ.

- Volunteer to work a trade show, either as a vendor or as part of a group of attendees. That's a *great* way to make connections with others in the organization. Given your merchandising role, this is a natural.
- Embrace one of those boundary-spanning appointments such as "Floor Safety Officer" or "United Way Chair," or even get involved in March Madness pools or fantasy sports teams. I'm not sure if your field assignments would work with this tip, but these roles give you a great a reason to chat up all kinds of people higher up the food chain that you're not supposed to be talking to.
- Get involved in some management training, especially the kind delivered to groups of people in a classroom, preferably in a remote city. This gives you good exposure to more people who can help you connect to an internal opportunity.

Keep being nice to Mr. Dead-from-the-neck-up. If he decides you're out to get him, you'll have a tire iron stuck in your back for sure.

If none of this brings success, dust off your resume and get on with an external job search. *Keep this entirely to yourself*, though, or you may find yourself fired, with plenty of time to look for a new job. Meanwhile, my best wishes for your continued success.

Dear Donald:

Send your career emergency to don@donaldasher.com, and watch this space for Asher's response.

BIO: Donald Asher is a nationally known writer and speaker on careers and higher education. He is the author of eleven books, including *Cracking the Hidden Job Market*; *How to Get Any Job: Life Launch and Re-Launch for Everyone Under 30*; *Graduate Admissions Essays*, the best-selling guide to the graduate admissions process; *Asher's Bible of Executive Resumes*; *Cool Colleges for the Hyper-Intelligent, Self-Directed, Late Blooming, and Just Plain Different*; and *Who Gets Promoted, Who Doesn't, and Why* (named Business Book of the Year 2008 by national career columnist Joyce Lain Kennedy). Asher speaks over 100 days a year from coast to coast, to college and corporate audiences. He is eager to hear your career emergency.