

Request a performance review, or let sleeping dogs lie?

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Managing your professional image goes far beyond formal evaluations. But they're a good (and necessary) start.

FORTUNE — Dear Annie: A friend sent me your **column** on changing a bad performance review, but I have a somewhat different problem, which is that I haven't been evaluated at all. Managers at my company usually give performance appraisals in January, partly to give everybody a chance to set goals for the year, but it's now March and my boss hasn't gotten around to it yet. Formal reviews determine some of our incentive pay, so naturally I'm curious.

On the other hand, I hesitate to press the point and ask to be evaluated. My boss has only been here a few months, and I know he's overloaded with work. But beyond that, he and I have had a couple of clashes over some changes he's made, and I'd hate to pressure him into giving me an evaluation that maybe won't be so great. Should I make the request anyway, or let sleeping dogs lie?— In the Dark

Dear I.D.: For what it's worth, your predicament is far from unusual. Plenty of studies over the past couple of decades have shown that many managers dread giving performance reviews so much that some of them (almost 40%, one report said) find ways to put off the chore indefinitely. And now that leaner staffs in many companies mean people are working harder than ever, the resulting time crunch gives reluctant bosses one more reason to duck this task.

“There could be any number of reasons why your boss hasn't sat down with you,” notes Patrick Sweeney, president of human resources consulting firm Caliper. “For example, since he is relatively new, maybe the expectations from his own higher-ups aren't clear yet. Or maybe he just doesn't like doing evaluations.”

Whatever the holdup is, Sweeney urges you to “start the conversation. You can keep your request very low-key,” he says. “Drop by the boss’s office or email him and say something like, ‘I was just wondering if we could set a time to talk, or maybe grab lunch. I’d like to keep you up-to-date on what I’m doing, and hear any advice you might have.’”

As for your suspicion that your boss is dodging you because he dislikes giving negative feedback, Sweeney muses, “If everyone else is getting evaluated and you’re not, that may be a bad sign. But even if that’s the case, keeping your head down and saying nothing won’t help. You’re better off hearing criticism sooner rather than later, because the sooner you hear it, the faster you can address whatever the problem is and figure out how to turn the situation around. Later may be too late.” Gulp.

Once you’ve gotten the ball rolling, Sweeney recommends keeping your boss informed about what you’re doing on a regular basis, maybe quarterly. “A formal annual review shouldn’t contain any surprises. It should be an outgrowth of discussions you’ve had during the whole year,” he says, adding: “If your boss has a number of other people reporting to him, he may need an occasional reminder of what you’re doing — small items as well as big projects. Keep a running list of your achievements that you can share.”

When it comes to being recognized (and rewarded) for your work, Sweeney notes, “the perception is as important as the reality.” Not only that, but regularly asking for suggestions “will help you stand out from the crowd.”

Good point. In an intriguing book, *Getting Ahead: Three Steps to Take Your Career to the Next Level*, author Joel Garfinkle takes this idea quite a bit further. Garfinkle, who has coached executives at Oracle **ORCL**, Google **goog**, Amazon **amzn**, Starbucks **sbux**, and many other big companies, says that if you want to move up in your company, you need to get honest feedback; not just from your boss, but from peers and subordinates as well. “People do have an opinion about you,” he says. “It’s wise to know what it is.”

Most of us have only a hazy idea of how others see us, Garfinkle believes. A cautionary tale: A coaching client at Amazon “told me he had a colleague who tended to suck all the oxygen out of the room,” Garfinkle says. “This person was brilliant, but he talked way too much and annoyed everyone around him, so people tuned him out. But he never knew this, because nobody told him, and he never asked anyone how he was perceived.” The man’s career went nowhere, and he never knew why.

Asking for constructive criticism is hard, Garfinkle acknowledges: “You may worry that you’ll hear something you don’t want to know, or you may be concerned that, by asking, you’ll be seen as insecure.” One approach that works is to assemble an informal team of advisors — trusted peers whose opinions you respect — that the filmmakers at Pixar call a “brain trust.”

When the director of a movie project hits a snag, Garfinkle explains, “a group of senior filmmakers called a brain trust steps in, evaluates the film in progress, and gives brutally honest feedback for about two hours.”

Admittedly, this sounds like an ordeal for the director. Still, says Pixar’s **DIS** president Ed Catmull in Garfinkle’s book, “It’s far better to learn about problems [with a film] while there’s still time to fix them than from the audience after it’s too late.”

Talkback: Does your boss give regular performance reviews? If you are a boss, have you ever procrastinated giving them? Why? Leave a comment below.