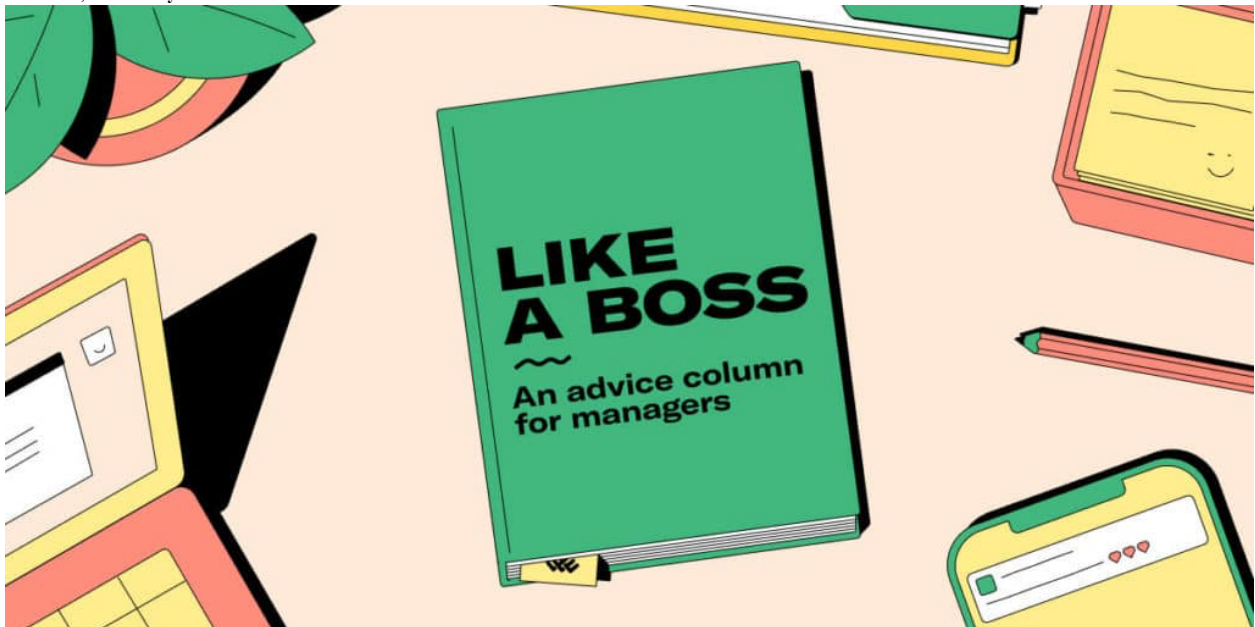


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Like a Boss: “How do I keep an employee who thinks he deserves a promotion motivated long enough to earn one?”

March 12, 2020 — By Jennifer Romolini



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Welcome to Lattice’s advice column for new managers, “Like a Boss.” I’m your host, [Jennifer Romolini](#). I’m an editor, an author (of the career guide “[Weird In a World That’s Not](#)”), and, yes, a boss who’s been managing other humans for the past dozen or so years at companies both giant and tiny, at quick and dirty startups and multi-layered corporations, with remote and in-office teams ranging from five to 45. I’m also a speaker who talks about succeeding at work even when you feel like a freak. And, sometimes, I give advice, like right now.

Dear Boss,

I'm a fairly new manager to my direct report. After a few months of working together, I feel like he's a solid member of the team, but he recently complained in our 1:1 that he thinks he's overdue for a raise and a promotion, claiming he's going above and beyond his peers in his current position — a claim I don't really think is true. I think he's doing good work but not great. How do I talk to him about stepping up more so I can justify a raise and promotion, but without upsetting him to the point that he's demotivated or leaves?

Thanks for your help,
Questioning my judgment in Austin

Dear Questioning,

Let's first address what I think is the most important part of this email — which is actually not about your employee (or raises or promotions) at all. What concerns me most in your message is how I see you questioning your own smart instincts and second-guessing your assessment of this employee's work simply because he told you you should.

This is, of course, a common new-manager instinct — most of us (particularly if we identify as female, ahem) want to please, but where we run into trouble is when we let the desire to make others happy cloud our vision and shape our decisions. Management is hard and gutsy work that's often subjective; it requires owning your power and giving yourself permission to make decisions you think are right. That you're taking this employee's request for a pay increase seriously means you are a considerate and thoughtful person. But your employee's feelings should not impact what you ultimately decide, nor should fear of "upsetting" him change how you move forward.

Focus instead on presenting yourself in a way that is honest, respectful, forthright, and consistent. Once you've decided what it takes for a member of your team to receive a raise and/or promotion (a process you may want to work out with HR); communicate this to the team and in your [1:1 meetings](#). Tell your employee you don't think he's quite there yet and lay out his path to success clearly and calmly,

without judgement or blame. This is your only responsibility here! It's not about making him happy nor giving him what he wants. Remember you can't control how he'll react, so stop trying to game the conversation like you can.

In terms of actually giving this employee more money and a better title, here are five questions I ask myself whenever I've approached about — or just considering myself — team members' raises and promotions:

1. Did they not only meet but exceed the [goals](#) the company has set out for them, especially in the last six months? (here is an excellent [guide to setting goals](#) expectations)
2. Is the employee indispensable? Meaning: Do they do more than their share of work? Do they do things no one else really knows how to do and/or do they do things better and faster?
3. Has there been a change in the employee's role: they're doing more senior work, they've been given more autonomy, they've subsumed the responsibilities of someone who left recently?
4. Are they reliable and consistent? Have they been reliable and consistent for the past six months?
5. Is there a project they've crushed that they can point to, something that really showcases what they can do?

The idea is that there should be some *advancement* in their role, something has changed in a positive way to make them more valuable than before, they've gone above and beyond in their position and deserve to be compensated for this change, beyond what they are already being compensated because their value to the company has increased.