

When seeking a raise, it pays to be tactful

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As employers turn their attention to 2005 budgets, now is a good time to ask for that raise you feel you so richly deserve.

But many of us go about asking for more money the wrong way, career experts caution.

"A lot of people go the complaining route: 'How come she is [paid this] and I'm not?' - a common, but not very productive approach, Alan Kearns, head coach at Ottawa based Career Joy, said in an interview this week.

Company veterans might feel they are entitled to raises by virtue of their expertise and long years of loyal service - and maybe they are, said career coach Mary-Frances Fox, president of Toronto-based Work Creatively Career Advisers.

But this argument doesn't play any more. "Longevity, breathing--these things don't count," Ms. Fox said.

In any event, management shuffles occur so frequently in some organizations that your new boss won't necessarily know who you are and what you can do.

Instead, you have to demonstrate your value to the enterprise if you want to do better than the 3.4-percent average salary increase that Canadian employers are budgeting for next year, the coaches advised.

The good news is that employers are more than willing to top up the salaries of their top performers. They want to reward performance," Todd Mathers, a Toronto based compensation consultant with Hewitt Associates, said in an interview this week.

The challenge for many employees is how to demonstrate their worth - particularly when employers are not always clear about what employees have to do to qualify for those raises and performance awards. Some will get bonuses, and not really know why, while others will be overlooked, Mr. Mathers said.

When this happens, the most straightforward strategy is for employees to ask "what they can do to support the business and succeed," he said.

"Even better, they should go to their manager with their own ideas, their own initiatives: 'This is what I think I should be doing. Does it make sense to hold me accountable to this and what kind of reward can I expect at the end of the year?' "

Sitting around waiting to be recognized is not a reliable strategy, he said. Some managers are better than others at recognizing and rewarding talent.

"If this is something that employees care about, they should take ownership of it and make sure, if the [rewards] program is there, they should maximize their chances of doing as well under the program as they can," he advised.

So how do you set yourself apart, and make the case for higher pay, without appearing to be a shameless, self-promoter?

With tact, Mr. Kearns advised. "It takes a lot of persuasive power. It takes belief that you deserve

this. It takes risk-taking but smart risk-taking," he said.

"Sometimes an off-the-record conversation about what's possible and what's not possible, some pre-negotiation before you formally pull this [pitch] together is something to consider," he said.

You have to "make a business case" for yourself and your value to the organization, Ms. Fox added.

"For the person who writes a cheque, you have to keep connecting the dots, show them. What you can do to help them meet their aims," she said. A recitation of past triumphs is not enough. Employers want to know what you can do for them tomorrow, she said.

It is easier to get recognition in a small organization than in a large organization that has a fairly entrenched pay structure, Mr. Kearns noted.

"Unless you figure out a way of differentiating yourself, you sort of get caught up in the mainstream of things," he said.

"You essentially have to position yourself. It's all about positioning. ... You need to think: 'How am I creating unique value in the organization and how do I position that so I am confident, but I'm not going in and threatening them?' "

Threats, demands and ultimatums can backfire, Mr. Kearns said, adding that it is often easier to negotiate a big salary when you are first joining an organization than when you have been around for a while.

Ms. Fox concurred: "*You* boss might think he knows you like an old shoe, even if he doesn't."

It is not uncommon for managers to typecast employees based on the job they are currently in, rather than on their potential, Ms. Fox said. And they may have no idea of what else you can do unless you tell them, she said.

"You are in charge of what people think about you."

Mr. Kearns said that, particularly in slower-growing industries where salaries are affected by "supply and demand realities," employees might find their workloads and responsibilities expanding without a corresponding increase in pay.

"Your role has changed significantly but because it has evolved slowly, not everyone has seen that," he said.

In this case, the employee often can make a convincing case for reclassification, a change in title or higher compensation, he said.

"Sometimes you are able to create a business case: 'You brought me in to be a manager, but if you look at what I am working on, you will see that I'm actually acting as a senior manager.' "

Managers, particularly in large organizations, need this sort of information so they can justify your pay increase to senior management, Ms. Fox said.

There are situations when an employer cannot afford to grant a pay increase - currently, both Mr. Kearns and Ms. Fox acknowledged.

When this happens, you might consider negotiating other benefits such as more flexible work hours,

paid educational leave, a sabbatical or something else of value, Mr. Kearns said - and position yourself for pay increases in the future.

"You may be negotiating the next opportunity, the kinds of projects you will be working on next, which will enable the other things to follow."

What should you do, however, if another employer offers you a job, at higher pay, and you have to decide whether to stay or go?

"It's hard to play that one, without threatening," Mr. Kearns said, "but also letting people know that you are in demand doesn't hurt."

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