

One last point on reading your boss. You can spare yourself a good deal of frustration and discomfort if you come to understand his or her management style. It makes no sense to wish for frequent praise or to assume that you are doing something wrong if you work for someone who is spare with feedback or “attaboys.” At the same time, a lack of criticism might mean you are doing poorly if you work for a person who tends to lower the boom with little warning. Do not expect your boss to communicate his feelings directly or clearly; it is up to you to make sure of your status, by asking either your boss or someone who is in a position to know.

### Making Your Case: Writing the Persuasive Memo

A crucial dimension of your relationship with your boss is your ability to persuade him to choose a preferred course of action or to take your side in an important debate. Sometimes you will be able to make your case in person; on other occasions it will be on paper, in a memorandum. Either way, you must make it effectively.

Odds are that you will most often present your arguments on paper, which uses your boss’s time more efficiently: a memo can be read whenever convenient, and it can travel places more easily than you can. For relatively junior people in an organization, memos have the potential to give their ideas a degree of access to high-level people that they themselves might not experience for years.

Writing effective memos is an art, and you should keep in mind <sup>art</sup> the following guidelines:

Memos should be as short as possible. There is always an enormous amount to read and do, and time is a scarce commodity. Do not waste your boss’s time by writing any more than is necessary; do not waste your own for the same reason. Put supporting documentation and materials in an addendum or tab if you must include them at all. Practice what Strunk and White preach in their classic essay, The Elements of Style: “Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing <sup>CSMAK</sup>

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should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell."<sup>10</sup>

2. *The purpose of a memo should be clear from the outset.* Are you raising a question or asking for a decision? Are you preparing your boss for a meeting or some other event? Are you providing a "think piece" meant to stimulate or provoke or inform? If there is a specific hook—be it a meeting, a trip, a vote, or an action that is required—say so.

3. *Anticipate what issues are of concern to your boss.* Your memo is more likely to be read and remembered if it addresses something of genuine concern to your boss, not just you. Avoid wasting time—yours as well as your boss's—with issues that are frivolous or that you can decide on your own. If your subject is not on your boss's mind when you start out, make the case early why it ought to be.

4. *Figure out how much work a memo needs to accomplish.* Will you have a chance to follow it up with a conversation or a meeting? Will there be a chance to do more? Or is this memo your only shot? Do no more or less than is necessary. — 1st para.

5. *A memo is not an Agatha Christie novel.* Do not save your punch line for the last paragraph. Take a lesson from journalists and get what matters most to you (and the reader) in the lead paragraph. You can always explain how it is you arrived at your position in the body of the memo.

6. *The analysis must be rigorous.* Your argument should not be shaped by your own conclusion or recommendation. Indeed, even those who reach a different conclusion should be able accept your analysis. Do not cook the books to make your point. If you have to, it is probably a good idea to rethink your own position.<sup>11</sup>

7. *The real costs and benefits of each option should be assessed over a period of time that is relevant.* For example, it is not intellectually honest to compare startup costs with immediate returns if over the life of the project the costs and benefits evolve significantly, as is often

the case. In addition, when making cost projections, include the error or degree of uncertainty in your assessment. Do not be afraid to include soft, intangible factors that may not be easily measured but can still affect the decision at hand; sometimes they are the most important. Also, if by choosing one option you forfeit the chance to do something else, say so; opportunity cost should be an important factor in any assessment.

8. *One of your options should be the status quo.* Like the other options, this one should be assessed fully. At a minimum, it offers a baseline. And sometimes patience and “staying the course” promise to yield the best result. “Don’t just do something, stand there” can be good advice.

9. *Divorce politics and partisanship from analysis.* Depending on a host of factors, ranging from the question at hand to your relationship with the intended recipient of the memo, it may be appropriate to include political (partisan) considerations. If you do include them, they should be kept distinct from the rest of your analysis. Better yet, save any political comments for when you see your boss informally. Nothing is more likely to leak and create a sensation than political judgments taken out of context.

10. *If there is relevant history, include it.* If a course of action similar to what you are proposing or assessing has been tried, say so, and say what was learned. A historic parallel can have a powerful effect on the reader. Just be sure that it is relevant and not overdrawn. Assess what resembles the past and what is different.<sup>12</sup> Every impropriety is not Watergate, every failure is not the Bay of Pigs. Do not reach for your umbrella and shout “Munich” unless you really think it is a case of appeasement that will have large-scale, adverse consequences.

11. *Include what will be necessary to implement your recommendation.* The best idea in the world is wasted if you cannot figure how to get it done. You are obligated to show how anything you propose can be accomplished and financed.

12. *Make sure that you include any weaknesses or risks in your own case.* This comes under the heading of not surprising the boss. Also, it

is always best to provide full disclosure; you can then go on to explain why the obstacles do not sink your argument.

13. *Overcome an opposing argument or perspective by preempting it.* Show why another position is deficient in a rigorous and honest way. Take on your opponents, but on your own turf. Do not leave it to them to present their own case without subjecting it to the scrutiny you can bring to bear.

14. *Do not provide analysis without offering your judgment about what is the best option.* Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who was a senior domestic policy official in the Nixon administration, puts it this way: “Men who counsel caution in a President do him no disservice, but they do not add much to his day.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, criticism alone rarely satisfies if your boss has to do something. He needs your thinking on the best available option, no matter how bad it might be, even if it means doing nothing. Walter Isaacson highlighted this in his biography of Henry Kissinger. “One lesson he learned was that a President does not need a lot of people who tell him what he cannot do; it is better to be one of those telling him what he can do, or at least offering preferable alternatives.”<sup>14</sup>

Condoleezza Rice makes a similar point:

Never just say “I disagree,” but have an answer for what an alternative might be. In academia, I love intellectual back-and-forths, just sitting down and hammering it out and coming together to some consensus. You do some of that in government. But mostly you don’t have time. It’s very important that you think through—before you go in—what you believe an alternative might be, and so you say, “I disagree with that, but here’s a better way that we could go.”

15. *Make sure the options are real ones.* The classic cold war memo, one that lays out the three options of launching an all-out nuclear attack, surrendering, or some wise, preferred middle course, does the reader no good. The first two options are so flawed, they are useless; the middle option is so big that it hides the real choices. It is far better to rule out the nonstarters and present the real

choices, their consequences, and what they would require to implement.

- (6) *Be sure of your facts.* As the saying goes, you're entitled to your own opinion, but not to your own set of facts. There is no faster way to discredit your work than to get something specific wrong. Never confuse a fact with an assumption or a prediction, no matter how confident you may be.
- (7) *Be explicit and careful about your assumptions and your methodology.* As with facts, you do not want your ideas or proposals to be discredited because of some minor flaws you introduced as you built your argument.
- (8) *Be aware of appearances.* Typos matter. It is difficult not to associate sloppiness in form with sloppiness in content.
- (9) *Memos can take on a life of their own.* You cannot be sure who will read your memo. Early in his tenure, Secretary of Defense Les Aspin was hurt by a memo several of his staffers left in the G: drive of their computer. The memo suggested that he should only go through the motions of consulting with the military leadership on the question of modifying the status of homosexuals in the armed forces. Needless to say, the military leaders were not amused to learn that what they thought was an opportunity to affect policy was little more than a sham. Before you send a memo, always ask yourself how it might look in the newspaper or help someone with a different agenda. }

It will  
be  
leaked

## When to Leave

One question remains about your relationship with your North: when to tell your boss that you are leaving. There are all sorts of reasons, some of them good ones, for leaving a job. They can be personal—a desire to spend more time with family and friends, a desire to make more money, a desire for greater challenge or growth, physical health. What distinguishes all these decisions is not that they are voluntary, although they are, but rather that they