

New manager's expectations are too high

You're sitting in your new boss's office and it's becoming clearer by the second that your new job comes with its share of stress. She wants you to increase sales by 20 percent as of yesterday, launch a new website tomorrow and, in your spare time, look into that little problem of low morale among your new team members.

OK, maybe it's not that bad! But your boss sure isn't about to give you any breathing room just because you're a new manager. Read on for tips on how to keep her happy — and keep yourself sane.

What could be going on?

- You're underestimating yourself.
- Your boss is overestimating your capabilities, or purposefully testing you.
- Your boss is under tremendous pressure from his or her boss.
- Your boss is just an unreasonable person.
- You aren't accustomed to the pressures of management yet.

Ways to handle it:

1. Negotiate on resources or deadlines.

You might be able to meet your boss halfway by agreeing to the goal or project, but bartering on resources or deadlines.

"I appreciate how critical these goals are. That deadline could be tough, though, since we also have the site upgrade in March. What if we were to shoot for Q2 instead?"

2. Politely push back with good data and questions.

You might be able to influence your manager by presenting compelling data and posing thought-provoking questions.

Let's say your manager thinks you should be able to increase sales by 20 percent in a single quarter. Research the team's track record and look into industry averages — and then present those numbers in a neutral, inquisitive tone of voice (avoid the temptation to sound snarky!). You might also try asking questions that spur reflection and deeper understanding.

3. Show your boss the trade-offs involved when setting priorities.

Go into meetings with your boss prepared to talk about the time commitments involved with various projects. That way, when he or she asks you to take on something new, you can present options. Let's say you and your boss have agreed that you need to hire an additional salesperson. You carve out some time to start looking through resumes and conduct phone interviews, and then your boss assigns a time-intensive research project. You could say something like this:

“My main goal this week was to select and interview candidates for the sales position. I anticipate that the research project will take at least two days, which would mean putting off half of the recruiting activities until next week. Which one is a higher priority for you?”

The beauty of this approach is you will also save yourself from having to defend any missed deadlines associated with whichever project is deferred.

4. Show that you're on your boss's side — without overcommitting.

Make sure that your doubts about your manager's expectations don't come across as doubts about your manager. Since your working relationship is in its infancy, you need to take extra care to convey that you understand where your boss is coming from. Keep your body language and tone of voice upbeat.

That doesn't mean you should overcommit; doing so could do irreparable damage to your credibility if you're unable to deliver down the line.

5. Identify and focus on your boss's top priorities.

Which goals really matter to your boss? Probe to find out. Then concentrate on the top ones. If you do well with those, he or she will probably cut you some slack on the lower-priority items.

6. Clearly communicate your team's plans, schedule and accomplishments.

In your 1-on-1s, or perhaps in a weekly email, describe your progress and plans. This will serve you well for three reasons:

- It will put your manager's mind at ease. After all, he or she doesn't know yet what you're capable of, and might be setting high expectations or even micromanaging you because you haven't proven yourself yet. Keeping him or her informed will go a long way toward establishing trust.
- It will remind your boss how much is on your plate. When your manager sees a report or hears a description of everything you have going on, it will send the message that you're not exactly sitting around twiddling your thumbs.
- It will provide an easy way to assess whether you're on the same page — not just when projects are first assigned, but throughout their lifecycle.

7. Work hard.

In some cases, it helps to show your boss that you're doing everything in your power to meet his or her expectations, and that if you fall short, it won't be for a lack of effort. You will likely gain your manager's respect, if nothing else, by putting in some extra effort.

A word of caution: Be wary of overworking your team. One of the experienced managers we spoke to shared a story about a new manager who agreed to a stretch goal that required her to rally her team. Unfortunately, her team members weren't happy about being driven so hard before their leader had established herself. This tough start caused the new manager to struggle building productive relationships with her team members in the months that followed.

8. Bring up work/life balance issues.

If your spouse and kids have forgotten what you look like, or you're falling asleep on the commuter train on the way home, it might be time to talk to your boss about the toll that his or her expectations are taking.

“Ellen, I’d like to talk about work/life balance issues in today’s 1-on-1. I’ve been running on empty for a while and I don’t want it to start affecting the quality of my work. Could you please share your thoughts on what you think a reasonable time commitment is from me?”

9. Give your boss direct, honest feedback.

It could be that your boss has no idea you feel overwhelmed or demoralized by his or her expectations. Maybe you need to tell him or her. Try initiating a conversation to resolve the issue. Be direct and specific, and present a solution if you can.

“Dmitri, I’m concerned that our expectations for the quality of my work aren’t aligned. The last two times I’ve completed a report, you’ve said you were disappointed. In order to improve, it would help to see an example of a report that you think is excellent, or hear about your specific requirements. Could you please help clarify what you’d like to see from me?”

10. Measure your success on your own terms — not just your boss’s.

Obviously, your boss’s opinion is important. But some people can’t be pleased, no matter what. If your manager falls into this category, accept that you won’t be able to change him or her.

Instead of feeling bad about yourself, focus on doing your job as best you can and remember to keep things in perspective. Don’t let an unreasonable boss demoralize you or destroy your positive outlook. Reach out to a mentor and other colleagues for support if you need it.