

What to do when you get mixed messages from your boss (or anyone else at work)

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Do any of these scenarios sound familiar?

“This credit-card replacement project needs to be the highest priority on your to-do list,” your boss insisted three days ago. But just this morning she said, “Drop everything and assist the product design team with their validation protocols.”

“I want you to call this client and handle them with sensitivity and tact,” your manager declared as he pounded on his desk with his closed fist.

You took your supervisor at his word when he told you that an important presentation was yours to design and deliver to the customer service team. But since then, he has revamped and rewritten more than 75 per cent of the PowerPoint slide deck you’ve created.

If these situations ring true, you’ve likely walked away from a similar encounter completely confused about what you should do next. Unfortunately, mixed or conflicting messages in the workplace are not as unusual as you might think – and often, your immediate supervisor is the guilty party.

To be clear, bosses don’t (usually) send you conflicting messages intentionally – it’s typically because they’re dealing with shifting priorities and you become the unintended recipient of their muddled minds. Having said that, however, in order for you to get things done, you need clarification. And it’s up to you to take positive steps to get it.

Share your confusion

Start by letting your manager know that you’re confused about what’s being asked of you. If you’re worried about being rude, don’t be. There are lots of ways to say what you need to say while still being professional and courteous. Try any of the following phrases, or adjust them to fit your own style.

Can you make something clear for me?

Just to clarify ...

Could you explain ...

Once you’ve opened the door to a constructive conversation, you can then continue to have a frank discussion that should hopefully lead to better understanding.

Identify the mixed messages

Conflicting messages can occur when someone’s words do not match past communication, behaviour or body language. But no matter the type of mixed message, describe both to your boss.

Again, here are some starter phrases to get you going:

When we talked earlier this week ... But now ...

I know you said ... But I also sense that ...

When we talked previously ... But now it seems like ...

The key is to clearly state where the conflict is occurring. You can't get clarity from someone else if you cannot articulate the contradiction yourself.

Ask for clarification or their advice

Next, ask for the inconsistency to be made clear. Pro tip: If you express it as a question, it will come across as supportive, and will often reduce defensiveness in the other person.

Which is the higher priority?

Which one would you like me to focus on first?

Which is of greater importance?

Alternatively, you could also phrase it as asking for guidance:

What approach would you suggest?

Do you have specific concerns?

I'd like your input on which is more important.

At this point, pause and wait for a response.

If necessary, describe the potential outcome

If you still don't receive the clarification and direction you need, continue the conversation by outlining the likely consequences of one or both of the conflicting messages.

If I were to do ... I am concerned it would cause issues with ...

I hear you, but if we proceed down that path, we might face problems with ...

If we ... we also run the risk of ...

Keep in mind that when people send you mixed messages, it is because they are often overwhelmed and unclear on a path forward themselves. When you outline the possible outcomes of courses of action, you are actually helping them achieve greater clarity as well. So don't be reluctant to speak up when conflicting messages confuse you – you might actually be helping your boss or co-worker make better decisions.

Learn more about your boss and the business environment

In addition to verbally asking for clarification when you get mixed messages, also take the time to generally glean further insights into your boss and your organizational environment. If you understand what the organizational and departmental goals are, what issues your boss considers

important, and what pressures and stressors are commonplace in your work environment, you can gain a better awareness of what your boss's thought processes are, and what they really want. Armed with this knowledge, you're more likely to be able to resolve many conflicting messages on your own, without having to ask further questions.

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