

How to Work for a Boss Who Always Changes Their Mind

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September 27, 2024

https://hbr.org/2024/09/how-to-work-for-a-boss-who-always-changes-their-mind?utm_medium=email&utm_source=newsletter_weekly&utm_campaign=weeklyhotlist_&deliveryName=NL_WeeklyHotlist_20240907

Summary. Working for a leader who always changes their mind is a maddening yet common experience. When the strategy is perpetually changing, it's challenging to be enthusiastic about the strategy du jour. When rework is viewed as inevitable, high effort is difficult to justify. A leader who constantly changes their mind will often leave behind an emotional wake of resentment. While you can't control your boss's behavior, five strategies can help you decrease the number of unwelcome pivots.

A client of mine, Rudi, works in marketing for a technology firm. His team had a goal to increase inbound leads via social media. Rudi, his boss, and some of their colleagues had a long brainstorming session, eventually reaching the conclusion they should be shooting more short-form videos to share on social channels.

Rudi worked all week on a project plan for how their team could create and share more videos. The stakeholders were identified, the metrics were defined, and the aggressive publication timeline his boss wanted was laid out. He was excited to dive in.

That Friday, he walked into his one-on-one eager to share the project plan with his boss.

"Huh," his boss huffed, after taking a passive glance at a very thorough deck. "I wonder if we should be going in a different direction. Did you see what our competitors put out yesterday? Maybe we should try influencer marketing instead of making our own stuff. Can you look into it?"

"Sure," Rudi replied, defeated.

Internally, Rudi was shrieking. At the start of the week, his boss was gung-ho about the team creating their own videos, and now, because of a stupid influencer TikTok from their competitor, the time Rudi spent making the project plan was a total waste.

And this wasn't the first time Rudi's boss had a seemingly random change of heart. It happened with the SEO overhaul project. It happened with the "Let's get interns this

summer!” idea. From design, to copy, to budget allocation, Rudi’s boss was constantly un-doing their own decisions.

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When the strategy is perpetually changing, it’s challenging to be enthusiastic about the strategy du jour. When rework is viewed as inevitable, high effort is difficult to justify. A leader who constantly changes their mind will often leave behind an emotional wake of resentment.

Reporting to an indecisive boss is an unquestionably “challenging and frustrating situation,” says Sydney Finkelstein, the director of the Leadership Center at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College. If your leader is easily influenced by whoever talked to them last, what other organizations are doing, or the TikTok they saw this morning, it shouldn’t sentence you to a constant state of flux. While you can’t control their behavior, you’re not powerless.

Here are five strategies I’ve used with my clients in this situation:

Give Your Leader a “Tee-Up”

Before you present something for your boss to respond to, lay some groundwork and set the stage for them to engage effectively. Proactively explain the context of the project, why it matters, who is involved, and what the expectations were (because they probably forgot).

Let’s say you work in customer success, and you’ve found your team is often missing out on valuable pieces of customer feedback. Customer comments left on social media stay in marketing, feedback given directly to a sales rep stays in sales, and customer-survey data is unorganized. You and your boss agree that better collecting and theming customer feedback would be a high-value project for your organization.

Over a few weeks, you create a project plan to tackle this challenge. You know you’ll need to work cross-departmentally, get into the weeds of existing data, and create sustainable systems to ensure lasting success. And now you’re ready to present your plan to your boss.

Instead of diving into the weeds, and asking, “What do you think of this project plan?”, be proactive by teeing up the conversation with something like:

Earlier this quarter, we discussed how valuable it would be to better collect and theme our customer feedback. We're missing valuable insights that could improve our products. To make this happen, we'll need to engage marketing, sales, and IT and create a system that sticks going forward, so we don't run into this again. Knowing that's our end goal, I wanted to share a project plan I created with you.

Which approach would result in a more thoughtful conversation? Which is more likely to create a lasting agreement? Which conversation would leave you *and* your boss feeling better?

When you're busy, taking the time to craft a tee-up feels laborious. Yet, if your leader has a history of back-pedaling, the few minutes you spend crafting a tee-up could save you hours or weeks down the road.

Be Specific with Your Questions

If you work for a leader who always changes their mind, asking "What do you think?" will put you on the fast track to a mountain of rework.

When asked for general feedback, most bosses *will* come up with something to change or add. It's your job to point them to where they can be most helpful. Defining the feedback scope is crucial.

Let's go back to our example of the customer feedback project plan. After you do a tee-up, make a specific feedback ask, such as: "I'm interested in your thoughts on the timeline I've laid out. Do you think it's realistic or too ambitious?"

Asking for feedback on something specific gives your boss's racing mind a place to land. The clearer you can be about what feedback you're looking for, the more efficient and effective your conversation will be.

When you're thinking about the specific questions you may want to ask your boss, it can be helpful to consider prompts like:

- What is my boss good at? How can I leverage their strengths?
- What's the most urgent component of what I'm discussing?
- What could potentially derail success?
- When considering all the elements of my plan, which will have the biggest impact on my success?

The intent is not to manipulate your boss. Being specific with your questions enables your boss to be effective with their feedback, by leveraging their strengths, zooming in on high-stakes elements, and supporting you in the most impactful way possible.

Define the “Editing” Phase

In some industries, like video, manufacturing, or publishing, there is a defined deadline until which you can make changes. In others, there isn’t a specific cutoff point. You can change things again ... and again and again. It’s expensive in the long run, but in the near term, there often isn’t a consequence.

Here’s some language you can use to define a “weigh-in period” with your boss:

In our initial conversations, we agreed the timeline of X was our goal. That means we need to have all feedback collected by Y. Otherwise, we will not hit our target, and that will result in Z.

Your boss likely has a plethora of projects and timelines in their brain. A simple reminder of when the “editing” phase is ending, and what’s at stake if you linger, is often all a seemingly indecisive boss needs to confidently close the loop.

Politely Push Back

You don’t want to be thought of as someone who refuses change, but constantly bending to the whims of your boss’s last-minute muses doesn’t serve you well either.

If you greet perpetual pivots with “no problem!” you are a willing partner in this very frustrating dance. There’s a middle ground, between toddler-level stubbornness and staying awake until midnight to rework your deck for the tenth time.

Consider politely pushing back with language like:

I understand your feedback. I know both of us want this (product, project, etc.) to be successful. I appreciate you taking the time to weigh in. I want to circle back to our objective of X. We’ve changed this several times.

- - Do you think the current version won’t accomplish the objective?
 - Will the change you’re requesting alter the outcome?
 - What’s the cost of waiting to move forward?

- Is the change worth the investment of (X amount of time) or would that time be better served prioritizing Y?

Tone is everything. You must ask these questions from a place of genuine curiosity. Perhaps, something has really changed.

Examine Your Own Reluctance to Change

The elusive certainty our brain so desperately craves is unlikely in today's business environment. Recognizing a baseline level of ongoing change as inevitable is crucial for leading yourself. More importantly, being able to operate in the face of change is imperative for your personal happiness.

Some bosses constantly change their minds because they don't think through their directives, don't value the time of their team, or aren't clear about the end game.

But many leaders change their minds because, even though it might be frustrating and create more work for you, the circumstances warrant it.

You don't want to work for a leader who *never* changes their mind. Good bosses are willing to try something different, chart a new course, or clean up a misstep. Change comes with the territory of progress. If every small "edit" is triggering a fight or flight response for you, it's worth exploring the root of your reluctance.

High performers lead up. You have the power to rein in your boss's endless ideas and decrease the number of unwelcome pivots.

Bosses who are always changing their minds often fall into that pattern because they're creative, enthusiastic, and always want to improve. Those are excellent qualities in a leader. With intentionality, you can reap the benefit without paying a never-ending rework price.