“My boss is freaking out,” writes a reader. “He’s constantly checking up on me, and every week, he changes my goals. I know he is worried about the business, but I wish he’d just let me do my job.” When hard times hit, managers know their own jobs can be at risk, and they might raise the expectations of their subordinates. My two words of advice to this employee are: Stay Calm.

Calm? You want me to stay calm?!? I can hear the protests. But the reality is that we all mirror the moods of those around us. To prove it, try this: throughout the day today, smile at ten people. Strangers, friends, store clerks, bus drivers. Make sure they see your pearly whites. How do they react? Confused? Maybe, for a moment. But most of the time, people will respond to a smile by smiling back. Frown at ten people, and you’ll get a similar response.

Putting the mood mirror lesson to work at work, try wearing a cheerful, competent attitude, even if you’re annoyed. Your calm can ease the tension around you. When your boss stops by your desk to tell you, for the fourth time, how important your project is, resist the urge to throw your stapler. Instead, look up, smile, and say, “I know it is.” End of discussion.

Obviously, you don’t have the same concerns that your manager has. Yes, you want to succeed. You also want your company to succeed, so that your paycheck continues to find its way to your bank. But your manager has different responsibilities. Don’t commiserate. Do share your accomplishments. Keep your manager in the loop when you make a sale, finish a project, or meet someone who can help your company in some way. Let him know you’re meeting your deadlines and remind him of any positives going on with the company.

If your metrics change faster than your socks, start tracking conversations in writing. Follow up each meeting with an email summarizing your discussion. If necessary, politely remind your manager about the goals or priorities laid out in past meetings. Find out if the new goals are a change from or in addition to previous targets. Let him know you want to understand clearly what the expectations are, and be up front about any conflicts. In panic mode, he might not even remember setting the first goals.
Your manager wants to know that you are as passionate about success as he is. He wants to know you share his concerns, even if you aren’t entirely sure what he is so worried about. He wants to let off some steam. A top quality manager would take it out to the basketball court or the golf course, but some just haven’t learned that yet. Demonstrate calm. Avoid engaging in his excitement.

Control what you can, and when your manager seems unreasonable, take a couple deep breaths and turn your eyes to your work. When it’s clear you don’t want to get involved, he will find a new outlet, and you can get back to your work.

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