

Productivity without micromanaging: the gentle art of nagging

Here's a question many managers struggle with: How do I get my employees to follow instructions without having to keep nagging them?

You may feel like a micromanaging pest, and too much nagging, of course, can make staffers feel stupid. They may think you lack faith in them. But by keeping quiet, you're left worried and uncertain as to whether important tasks will get done.

Silently hoping your employees follow through isn't much of a strategy. Try these non-pushy ways to nag:

Ask first

When you first tell employees that you need them to do something, don't just bark out orders and leave it at that. Ask for their input on how you should follow up. Example: If you want to ensure that a worker attends an upcoming meeting, say, "I'm about to give you all the details about an important meeting that I want you to attend. How would you like me to follow up in the days ahead to make sure you're there?"

Most employees will insist that follow-up isn't needed; after all, who wants to admit that they may forget? In any case, by allowing them to decide whether you should nag or not, you place the responsibility to comply squarely on their shoulders.

Clip and send related materials

If you don't want to nag, try the indirect approach. Photocopy a memo, report or newspaper article that relates to the task at hand and attach a handwritten "FYI" note. On the surface, you're providing helpful tidbits of information that make your employees' jobs easier. But at the same time, you're implicitly reminding them that the work must get done.

Send team messages

If you've delegated key tasks to a group, follow up with email. Remind everyone of what needs to happen and include a timetable.

Get advice

Rather than pester others, find out how they manage the same situation with their staff, spouse, children, etc. Say, "You know, I hate to be put in a position of having to nag. How do you handle it when you need to make sure others follow through?" They may have already devised some great techniques that will work just as effectively on them!

Expect compliance

Even if you're concerned that someone won't do what you've asked, maintain a pleasant, upbeat demeanor when checking in with them. Don't fret or grimace when you ask for a progress report ("How's it going on that project?"). Your tone should reinforce your expectation that the assignment is in capable hands and you're confident it'll get done.

"My employees rise to a higher level of dependability if I let them know that I trust them to deliver," says a product manager for a consumer goods company. "One could call it nagging. But I'm just rallying them to turn in great work on time or give me that extra effort."