

## Are You Deaf? What to Do About a Boss Who Can't Hear



You can send your workplace questions to Stephen at: [StephenSays@bellow.press](mailto:StephenSays@bellow.press)

Questions selected to be answered, will appear in this column. Please use the Subject: Stephen Says for all emails. Stephen Viscusi is a bestselling author, television personality, and CEO of The Viscusi Group, global executive recruiters located in New York. Follow Stephen on Twitter @stephenviscusi, Like Stephen on Facebook; and follow him on LinkedIn.

**Dear Stephen:**

*I work for a boss who is in his very early 50s, and I swear he is going deaf. Whenever we are talking he can't seem to hear me, but he also hasn't given any indication anything is wrong. I can tell he isn't following the dialogue when we are at client presentations or luncheons, and he'll even make clients repeat themselves. Sometimes, it seems like he is trying to read lips. One-on-one, it is 10 times worse. On more than one occasion, I have tactfully said to him that he needs to have his hearing checked. And honestly, I am not really sure why he doesn't.*

*Maybe he is embarrassed to wear a hearing aid, or maybe he's concerned that it signals that he's getting old. The problem is, I can see him becoming irritated with me, and I am also getting frustrated with him. What should I do?*

*Signed,*

**Can you hear me now?**

Dear Can you hear me now:

If your boss were older, this might be simpler. I've had to deal with similar situations where people struggling to come to terms with their

age refuse accommodations that would help them. I know, for example, that the perceived stigma of hearing aids prevents people from investing in them. (They are also rarely covered by insurance and cost thousands of dollars, but that's another story.) The irony is that for many of those so concerned a hearing aid would be the death knell of their careers, the exact opposite is likely the case. It's hard to get good people, especially in executive positions, and companies wouldn't be so quick

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to part with people who produce results. Combine that with the lawsuits they'd have to deal with and getting a hearing aid can actually be a job-securing step.

Your situation is slightly different because while your boss might not love the idea of a hearing aid, it's more difficult to assume he's worried about seeming old. Despite my eminent wisdom, I'm no doctor, and I have no idea what's going on with your boss. One thing is certain, though, your situation is untenable. Luckily, it sounds like you've come to me before you had the chance to mess it up too badly.

Before you do anything crazy, you have to make sure this isn't in your head. I know that might sound a bit zany, but stranger things

have happened. Talk to others in the office, and see if they've had similar experiences with your boss. If they all think he is fine, then it might be worth taking some elocution lessons.

Assuming you aren't imagining things or mumbling, I think you have three options. The first is to pretend nothing is going on and just start speaking louder. This isn't a long-term solution, but it will hopefully make your boss less irritated. The second is to go over your boss's head (if that's an option) or go to his family if there is no one above him. This will likely get your boss to do something, but it will almost definitely make him very angry with you, as well. I wouldn't go this route. The third and final option is the one I recommend. Be

direct with him. Schedule some time to talk with him and ask him what's going on and explain your concerns. I understand this is a risky proposition, and he might get angry or deny there's an issue, but even the most obstinate people are forced to self-reflect when confronted directly.

Sometimes we are met with bizarre and uncomfortable problems in the workplace. The Viscusi Rule for these situations is to be direct, while being respectful. It's far better to speak your mind than dance around the gorilla in the room. Some might call it necessarily brazen, but I've made a career out of it. Believe me, good bosses will appreciate this type of candor.

**Stephen**