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Lump of Coal: How to Deal With a Bad Bonus

By Jane Porter

Let's face it, in the throes of a down economy, your bonus is likely to be less-than-expected this year (if you're fortunate enough to receive one). According to payscale.com, bonuses dropped an average of 33% across the financial sector over the past two years, including a 49% drop for investment banking analysts and a 66% drop for senior investment banking associates.

But while the ink may be dry on your compensation check, that doesn't mean it's too late for you to turn things around. With next year in mind, you can set yourself up for career growth. So instead of griping by the water cooler this January, take the opportunity to turn that lump of coal into a chance to increase your own value.

Manage Your Attitude

It's easy to commiserate with co-workers, but maintaining a positive attitude at a time when most people are disgruntled will help your career far more now than it ever could. Remember: the way you behave now will have later ramifications says Marsha Egan, CEO of Reading, Pa.-based professional coaching firm, The Egan Group Inc.

"It's career-limiting to come across as dissatisfied," she says. Not taking the outcome personally, and realizing that the bonus cut is part of a companywide strain can help you cope with the disappointment, but joining a chorus of complaining won't do you any good.

Nonetheless, be sure to clear your head with someone removed from the situation before you take any action, says Kim Ann Curtin, a finance career coach. "Sometimes we jump so fast that the emotions haven't been fully processed," she says. The last thing you want is to be in the boss's office and getting emotional.

Sit Down With the Boss

If you have unanswered questions, talking with your manager about how bonuses were determined is a fair conversation to have, but be sure to take a forward-looking approach, says Egan.

Frame your conversation around how you can help the company rather than making it all about you. What are some things you can do to help bring bonuses back for everyone? How can you better serve the company moving forward? Dwelling in the past is a surefire way to tick off the boss, says Don Hurzeler, a former executive with insurance company Zurich North America Middle Markets, who handed out bonuses for more than 30 years of his career. "The person who comes back to me to put a needle in my side over it is not going to do well with me," he says. "Move on and get a little closer to what you are looking for next time around."

If the end-of-year package was a total shocker to you, consider requesting your bonus be paid quarterly rather than annually in the future, says Peter Deragon, North America practice leader for financial services at Stanton Chase International, a Dallas-based executive search firm. Requesting a more spread out reward or a clearer performance evaluation next year can help avoid a big end-of-year surprise. While it may be out of your boss's hands at a larger organization, making these kinds of requests at a smaller finance firm might be an option.

Go Beyond the Money

You're not getting as much as you expected so you might as well put in fewer hours, right? Maybe ask the boss for Fridays off? But in a tough economy, there's nothing more dangerous than slacking off, says Rick Smith, author of "The Leap: How 3 Simple Changes Can Propel Your Career from Good to Great" and co-author of "The 5 Patterns of Extraordinary Careers," a best-selling professional career book.

On the contrary, taking on a leadership role at a time when others are griping and doing subpar work can set you apart from the crowd. "You're not paying me so can I slack off" is the worst possible thing you can do for your career," he says.

Smith suggests taking the opportunity to seek out more responsibility rather than less. "This is a great time -- when your boss feels guilty because [he or she] can't give you the money -- to say, 'OK, expand my role in this way,'" he says. Consider asking for a better title or new leadership opportunities that will help you when the

economy does improve. "Your value can rise independent of your compensation," he says.

Create a Value Proposition

If you are convinced you should have received more money this bonus season, it's not out of the question to approach your boss, but make sure to have a very clear case for how you contributed to the bottom line before you even think of stepping into his or her office.

Jack Chapman, career and salary coach and author of the book, "Negotiating Your Salary," recommends researching the marketplace to see how your compensation stacks up to others. Web sites like PayScale.com and salary.com offer data-driven estimates for bonuses and salaries in your field and job-level, while sites like Glassdoor.com and Vault.com let you see other people's career stories, sometimes including valuable information about compensation.

Bringing up companies interested in hiring you is another way to approach renegotiating that may be effective, but be careful how you do it. "The way to do that is to not just to go in and say I got another offer," says Chapman. Mentioning another specific offer -- real or fictitious -- shows you went all the way through with the interview process somewhere else. Instead, let the boss know recruiters have been contacting you with promises of a higher salary and while you want to turn them down, the money makes it tough, says Chapman.

Regardless of your approach, go into the room with a specific number in mind, he advises. Knowing what you want and putting it out there will do you far more good than letting the boss throw out a number first.

Reevaluate Your Career

Jim Piper, principal at Stanton Chase gets about 20 resumes a day from traders alone. "It's probably a good time to eat your dissatisfaction," he says. Nonetheless, if your bonus has you contemplating jumping ship, it's also a good time to reevaluate why you're there in the first place. "If you don't really enjoy this business from an intellectual standpoint, go someplace else," he says. "The bonus structuring situation will never be as it was before."

Ride It Out

While compensation tends to be similar across different companies in the same industry, opportunities for growth can be vastly different, says Smith. Don't let one year's results govern the rest of your career by overreacting. "Keep your head down, build value for yourself and eventually you will get paid down the road," he says. "Do the right thing and compensation will catch up to you. It always does."

Having a professional conversation with your boss -- asking what you can do in the future and how you can expand your role -- will help you turn the disappointment of a less-than-expected bonus into a chance to further your career. Keep in mind, in a tough economy, just having a job, for many, is bonus enough.