

The Salary Correction Playbook

How to Fix Being Underpaid Without Burning Bridges

You do not get paid what you deserve. You get paid what the organization believes it must pay to keep the value you create.

That sounds cold, but it is useful. Your job in a salary correction conversation is not to prove you are a good person, hint that you are frustrated, or hope your manager notices the gap. Your job is to make the business case obvious: your work is worth more than your current compensation, the market supports that claim, and correcting it is easier than losing you.

This guide is for the employee who suspects they are underpaid and wants a raise without turning the relationship adversarial. It gives you the research process, the framing, the exact words, and the follow-up plan.

The tone to aim for: calm, prepared, collaborative, impossible to dismiss.

1. Stop Asking for “A Raise.” Ask for a Correction.

“Raise” sounds optional. “Correction” sounds like fixing a mismatch.

You are not walking in with a vague request for more money because life is expensive. You are showing that your compensation has fallen out of alignment with your role, impact, and market value.

Use this language:

“I’d like to discuss a compensation correction based on the scope I’m operating at, the results I’ve delivered, and current market data for this role.”

That single sentence does three things:

- It anchors the conversation in evidence, not feelings.
- It signals you have done your homework.
- It gives your manager a cleaner internal story to take to HR or finance.

Managers often cannot approve raises alone. They need ammunition. Your goal is to make it easy for them to repeat your case in a room where you are not present.

2. Build Your Market Number Like a Prosecutor

Do not bring one salary screenshot. Bring a range built from multiple sources.

Use at least five inputs:

1. **Posted salary ranges** for similar roles in your city, remote market, or company peer group.
2. **Levels.fyi, Glassdoor, Payscale, Built In, Blind, and recruiter conversations** for current market signals.
3. **BLS wage data** for a conservative government baseline.
4. **Peers you trust** in similar roles, especially people who recently changed jobs.
5. **Your own company's job postings** if they list ranges for roles like yours.

Create a simple table:

Source	Role Match	Location/Remote	Range	Notes
Company A posting	High	Remote US	\$135K–\$165K	Similar scope
Levels.fyi	Medium	NYC	\$145K median	Same title
Recruiter call	High	Remote US	\$150K–\$175K	3 companies hiring

Then decide your target:

- **Minimum acceptable correction:** the number that makes staying rational.
- **Target ask:** the number you will request.
- **Strong anchor:** the top of the credible range, if your evidence supports it.

If your research says the market is \$130K–\$160K and you make \$112K, do not ask for “maybe \$125K.” That trains the company to under-correct. Ask for a specific number inside the credible market range.

Script:

“Based on the data I gathered, comparable roles are clustering between \$130K and \$160K. Given my current scope and results, I believe an adjustment to \$145K is appropriate.”

Specific numbers are easier to evaluate than vibes.

3. Write the Brag Sheet They Can Forward

Before the meeting, build a one-page compensation memo. This is not a diary of effort. It is evidence of business value.

Use four sections:

Current Scope

Show what you are responsible for now, especially responsibilities that were not in your original job description.

“I now own onboarding for the enterprise segment, mentor two junior analysts, and serve as the primary contact for the West region renewal forecast.”

Measurable Impact

Tie your work to money, risk, speed, retention, revenue, customer satisfaction, or executive priorities.

“The renewal workflow I rebuilt reduced late-stage escalations by 31% and helped protect \$1.2M in at-risk ARR.”

If you do not have perfect metrics, use credible proxies:

- Before/after cycle time
- Volume handled
- Error reduction
- Revenue influenced
- Customers retained
- Executive-visible projects shipped
- Hiring, training, or team leverage created

Market Data

Summarize the range, not every screenshot.

“Across eight comparable postings and three compensation datasets, the consistent range for this role is \$130K–\$160K.”

The Ask

Make the number explicit.

“I’m requesting a base salary correction to \$145K, effective this quarter.”

Keep the memo clean enough that your manager could paste it into an approval request.

4. Prime the Conversation Before the Meeting

Do not ambush your manager in a 1:1 and hope they can decide on the spot. Send a short agenda first.

Email:

Subject: Compensation alignment discussion

Hi [Name] — I’d like to use part of our next 1:1 to discuss compensation alignment. Over the past [time period], my scope has expanded to include [brief scope], and I’ve pulled together market data and impact notes that I’d like to walk through. My goal is to discuss a correction that reflects the level I’m operating at. Thanks.

This gives them time to think, avoids defensiveness, and signals that you are serious.

If your company has a formal review cycle, do not wait passively for it. Ask when decisions are actually made. Many raises are decided weeks or months before the meeting where employees hear the result.

Script:

“When are compensation decisions for this cycle actually finalized, and what would you need from me before then to advocate for an adjustment?”

That question turns your manager from judge into guide.

5. The Meeting Script

Start with confidence and collaboration.

“I appreciate you making time for this. I want to talk about compensation alignment. I’m committed to the team and the work, and I also want my compensation to match the scope and impact of the role I’m performing.”

Then present the case in three beats:

“First, my scope has expanded. I’m now responsible for [scope].”

“Second, the results have been strong. The clearest examples are [impact 1] and [impact 2].”

“Third, I researched comparable roles and the market range is consistently around [range]. Given that, I’m asking for [specific salary].”

Then stop talking.

Silence is not rude. It is where the other person processes the ask. Do not negotiate against yourself by adding, “But I understand if that’s too much.”

If they say, “That’s a big jump,” respond:

“I understand it’s a meaningful adjustment. That’s why I wanted to ground it in scope, impact, and market data rather than just preference. Which part of the case feels least aligned from your perspective?”

That question forces specificity. If they challenge the number, you can discuss data. If they challenge performance, you can ask what bar is missing. If they challenge budget, move to the next section.

6. When They Say “We Don’t Have Budget”

“We don’t have budget” is not the end of the conversation. It is the start of a more precise one.

Do not respond with anger. Respond with options and dates.

Script:

“I hear you. If the issue is timing rather than merit, can we talk through the path to making this correction? What budget cycle, approval process, or business milestone would allow it?”

Then ask for specifics:

“What number would be possible now?”

“Can we set a written compensation review for [date]?”

“What would need to be true for the company to approve [target salary]?”

“If base salary is constrained, what flexibility exists around bonus, equity, title, remote work, professional development budget, or a retention adjustment?”

Be careful: perks are not the same as salary. A conference budget does not fix a \$25K compensation gap. But alternative levers can be useful if paired with a dated base salary review.

Your goal is to avoid the vague purgatory of “Let’s revisit later.” Later is not a plan. A plan has a date, criteria, owner, and target.

Follow-up email:

Thanks for discussing compensation alignment today. My understanding is that the company agrees my scope and impact support a correction, but current budget timing prevents an immediate full adjustment. We agreed to revisit on [date], with [specific criteria] as the basis for moving toward [target salary]. Please let me know if I captured that accurately.

This email is polite, but it creates a record.

7. How to Use Competing Offers — Even Without One

The strongest leverage is a real alternative. In negotiation terms, this is your BATNA: your best alternative if this deal does not work.

But you do not need to wave a signed offer letter to improve your position. You need to understand what alternatives are realistically available.

Build “soft leverage” before you need it:

- Take recruiter calls.
- Ask what range they are seeing for your role.
- Interview occasionally, even if you like your job.
- Keep a list of companies hiring for your skill set.
- Track posted ranges monthly.

You can reference market pull without bluffing.

Script without an offer:

“I’m not bringing this up as a threat. I like the work here. But the market data and recruiter conversations I’m seeing suggest my current compensation is materially below market. I’d prefer to resolve that here rather than make compensation the reason I explore outside options.”

That is firm, honest, and non-theatrical.

If you do have an offer, do not turn the conversation into blackmail.

Script with an offer:

“I received an outside offer at [number]. I’m sharing it because I value this team and wanted to give us a chance to discuss whether staying here can make sense. My preference is not to create drama; it’s to make a clear decision with accurate information.”

One warning: accepting a counteroffer can change how leadership sees you. Sometimes it works. Sometimes it buys six months while they plan around you. Use an outside offer primarily to clarify your own options, not as a stunt.

8. If They Say No

A no is useful if it becomes information.

Ask:

“What would need to change for this to become a yes?”

If they say performance:

“What specific outcomes would demonstrate I’m operating at the level required for [target salary or level]? Can we define those in writing and review progress on [date]?”

If they say level/title:

“What is the gap between my current scope and the next level? Which responsibilities or results would close that gap?”

If they say budget:

“When will budget reopen, who owns the decision, and can we schedule the review now?”

If they cannot give criteria, date, or ownership, treat that as data. It may mean your manager likes you but cannot help you. It may mean the company’s compensation system rewards new hires more than retained employees. It may mean you need an external move to reset your pay.

Do not threaten. Decide.

Your internal deadline matters. For example:

“If there is no concrete path to [target] by [date], I will begin a focused external search.”

You do not need to say that out loud. You need to know it.

9. The Mistakes That Cost People Money

Avoid these:

- **Making it personal first.** Inflation, rent, and fairness may be real, but they are weak approval arguments. Lead with business value and market alignment.
- **Asking too late.** If budgets are already locked, you are negotiating after the decision.
- **Giving a range where the bottom is too low.** If you say “\$120K to \$145K,” many companies hear “\$120K.”
- **Over-explaining after the ask.** Make the case, state the number, pause.
- **Accepting vague encouragement.** “You’re doing great” is not a compensation plan.
- **Bluffing about offers.** If they call it, you lose credibility.
- **Confusing loyalty with leverage.** Being liked helps. Being hard to replace helps more.

The most underpaid employees are often the most agreeable. They wait, over-deliver, and hope the company reciprocates. Some companies do. Many simply accept the discount.

10. Your Copy-Paste Prep Checklist

Before you ask, have these ready:

- Target salary: [\$___]
- Credible market range: [\$___-\$___]
- Three strongest impact bullets: [impact, metric, business result]
- Expanded scope since last compensation decision: [scope]
- Manager agenda email sent: [date]
- One-page compensation memo: [done/not done]
- Backup levers if base is delayed: [bonus/equity/title/review date/etc.]
- Walk-away date if no concrete path appears: [date]

The raise conversation should feel almost boring by the time you have it. The work is in the preparation.

Research Base

This playbook synthesizes negotiation principles and field-tested salary advice from sources including Ramit Sethi's salary negotiation scripts, Lara Hogan's management and compensation equity writing, Harvard Program on Negotiation materials on BATNA, Patrick McKenzie's compensation essays for engineers, Ask a Manager's practical raise advice, Levels.fyi compensation data practices, Stanford Career Education negotiation scripts, BLS wage data, NLRB guidance on wage discussions, and recurring lessons from engineering career communities.

Selected sources to keep handy:

- [Ramit Sethi: Salary Negotiation](https://www.iwillteachyoutoberich.com/salary-negotiation/) (https://www.iwillteachyoutoberich.com/salary-negotiation/)
- [Patrick McKenzie: Salary Negotiation](https://www.kalzumeus.com/2012/01/23/salary-negotiation/) (https://www.kalzumeus.com/2012/01/23/salary-negotiation/)
- [Ask a Manager: Guide to Asking for a Raise](https://www.askamanager.org/2018/02/the-ask-a-manager-guide-to-asking-for-a-raise.html) (https://www.askamanager.org/2018/02/the-ask-a-manager-guide-to-asking-for-a-raise.html)
- [Harvard Program on Negotiation: BATNA](https://www.pon.harvard.edu/daily/batna/translate-your-batna-to-the-current-deal/) (https://www.pon.harvard.edu/daily/batna/translate-your-batna-to-the-current-deal/)
- [BLS Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics](https://www.bls.gov/oes/) (https://www.bls.gov/oes/)
- [NLRB: Your Right to Discuss Wages](https://www.nlr.gov/about-nlr/rights-we-protect/your-rights/your-rights-to-discuss-wages) (https://www.nlr.gov/about-nlr/rights-we-protect/your-rights/your-rights-to-discuss-wages)
- [Stanford Career Education: Negotiation Scripts](https://careered.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj22801/files/media/file/negotiation-scripts-resource.pdf) (https://careered.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj22801/files/media/file/negotiation-scripts-resource.pdf)

Use these sources as inputs, not commandments. Your company, role, state, and relationship with your manager all matter.

Want a Second Set of Eyes?

If your situation is simple, this guide may be enough. Build the memo, rehearse the script, and ask clearly.

If the stakes are high — you are underpaid by a lot, worried about damaging the relationship, dealing with a promotion cycle, or deciding whether to use an outside offer — PayPitch can help you pressure-test the plan before you walk into the room.

The PayPitch Strategy Session is a focused 1-on-1 working session where we help you sharpen the number, tighten the business case, plan the conversation, and prepare for the likely objections.

No hype. No fake confidence. Just a better strategy before a conversation that could be worth thousands.

Need a sharper plan? Book the \$97 PayPitch Strategy Session for personalized market research, scripting, and objection rehearsal before your compensation conversation.