

Managing up

Beverly Landais explains how best to develop a productive working relationship with your boss.

This article originally appeared in **PM** magazine. For further details go to www.pmforum.co.uk

We all tend towards one style of working more than another due to our personal preferences, the influence of role models and prior experience. Yet one approach does not fit all scenarios. The people you manage will likely perform better if you appropriately apply a broad set of working styles. Likewise, understanding how your boss operates helps you build a productive working relationship with them.

What is managing upwards?

Some people find the idea of managing up an uncomfortable concept associating it with sycophantic behaviour or blatant flattery to win favour. The truth is far removed from this unctuous stereotype. Managing upwards if done right is not manipulation or 'sucking up' to people in powerful positions. It is about learning techniques and strategies to help you be more effective at work and happier in your job. Managing up involves consciously working with your boss to achieve optimum results for you, the wider team, and the organisation.

You will experience a variety of management styles during your career. Good bosses invite your opinions and respect them. They will encourage you to stretch your potential and provide support if you stumble. They will credit you for your ideas, applaud effort with praise and give you timely constructive criticism.

On the other hand, you might encounter a dysfunctional boss who is untrained and ill-prepared to get the best from you. They might lack organisation and planning skills and blame others for their mistakes. Often you can't depend on them for support. It is in your best interest to be prepared and deal construc-



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tively with any shortcomings.

Although you cannot control your boss, you can influence your relationship with them by taking steps that build understanding and foster mutual respect. Here are six fundamental principles to keep in mind.

1 Understand that your boss

depends on you. Your behaviour and performance will either improve their day or make their life more difficult. Your boss needs help and cooperation to do their job effectively, and you can supply this. Once you begin to see the relationship through this lens, you'll start to see issues from their perspective. Then you can use this insight to guide your actions intelligently. Ask rather than make assumptions if you don't know their top challenge. For example, what are they trying to accomplish? What difficulties do they face? How can you best support their goals? Seek to understand their aspirations, pressures and constraints. Look for commonalities to build trust and appreciation, as these are the bedrock of a

productive working relationship.

2 Accept that you will depend on

your boss. Ego can be at play when ignoring the input needed from your boss to do your job well. Understand what job your boss was hired to do. Life at work can be far smoother when you realise the benefit of tapping into the information, insight, and resources a boss can supply. Always manage their expectations, keep them appropriately informed and honour your commitments. It's not about being a 'yes' person. Be prepared to discuss the priorities with your boss. Be clear about your workload and capacity to do more. What resources do you need? How could you be better prepared? Are there tasks that could be streamlined, delegated or ditched?

3 Take charge of communications with your boss.

Many people assume that the boss will magically know what information, support and guidance their subordinates need. Some bosses do an excellent job of looking out for their staff and anticipating what is required, but it is best not to expect this. After all, bosses are only human and juggle many different issues and priorities. Don't wait to be asked what you need or how things are going – take responsibility for managing communications with your boss.

Be alert to how your boss likes to be kept informed. Some might prefer regular check-ins at the top level; others want more detail. Asking what works for them will prevent misunderstandings and save you time in the long run. Report regularly on essential jobs and critical issues. Highlight emerging or potential problems and suggest contingency plans to deal with these. Swiftly deal with problems as bad news ages poorly. Remember, the



best surprise is no surprise.

4 Be responsible for your career and professional development.

People who are the most fulfilled and happy in their careers take steps to determine what they want from work. Some companies provide specific training to help staff up the career ladder. Others take a continual assessment approach to identify developmental needs. Find out how your organisation operates and what the options are for you. Take time to understand how you will be evaluated and what success looks like in your role.

Share your career goals with your boss. Ask for feedback and be open to constructive criticism about any skills gaps that they perceive. Ask what they see you doing well, what might be improved and their suggestions to achieve this. Use these conversations to discuss learning opportunities and get guidance on gaining experience. Show them that you want to expand your skillset by developing sensible business cases for your involvement in training opportunities, mentoring or secondments. If you wish to be taken seriously, you'll need to solve problems, be willing to get involved and own your expertise.

5 Learn how to think and act strategically. It is also vital that you develop a sense of the 'bigger picture' to think and

act strategically in your role and relationship with your boss. Awareness of the 'bigger picture' means appreciating the broader context in which you, your team and your boss operate. You can be more strategic by staying alert to the competitive forces at work in your organisation's sector. Do you know the current strategies for dealing with them? If not, take steps to find out.

Take an active interest in how your organisation is doing. Find out about cross-functional projects as these may yield opportunities for you. Take responsibility for thinking about how your skillset and role fits into the organisation's goals. Knowing this will enable you to focus your effort, capabilities and resources on achieving maximum impact and benefit. Avoid a silo mentality by being mindful of the pressures and deadlines your boss and peers face.

6 Use your Emotional Intelligence.

Managing upwards also requires the use of Emotional Intelligence. Also known as EQ, Emotional Intelligence is defined by psychologist and science journalist Daniel Goleman as "the capacity for recognising our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and our relationships."

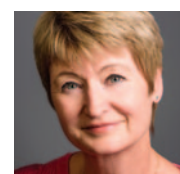
Emotional intelligence is a valuable concept to understand. Developing your

ability to apply it will help you foster better relationships. An emotionally intelligent person understands their strengths and weaknesses and knows that it is more productive to manage emotions than being led by them. According to Goleman, EQ is a critical ingredient in all forms of management and leadership. His research showed that influential people are alike in one crucial way: they possess a high degree of EQ. Goleman suggests that there are five essential components of EQ:

- Self-awareness: possessing the insight to recognise and understand your moods, emotions, drives, and the impact you may have on others.
- Self-regulation: means choosing your response to different situations and regulating behaviour rather than being led by your emotions.
- Motivation: is a passion for working for reasons beyond money and status. Often coupled with a propensity to pursue goals with energy, enthusiasm and persistence.
- Empathy: the skill to comprehend the emotional makeup of others and skill in treating people according to their emotional reactions.
- Social skills: the ability to interact well with diverse people and build happy and productive relationships based on cooperation, understanding and respect.

Tapping into your EQ is vital to effectively managing your relationships at work, your boss included. You can foster empathy by showing an interest in their goals, challenges, and aspirations. Help them see how they can get the best from you by sharing information about your drivers, capabilities and working methods.

Most bosses are happy to help you progress, but they can't do this if they don't know what you want. Remember, it is in your boss's interest to discuss your career development with you. This way, they can manage the team better because they'll know who is interested in progressing. Take responsibility for managing the relationship with your boss, and you will reap the benefits of improved understanding and a sense of common purpose.



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