

Managing Up

You must know how to follow before you can lead. Anonymous

There are two distinct roles that executives and managers are asked to play. One is a role of a leader in your own right. The other is the role of a courageous follower.

Reality Check

I am on track if:

- “You have a good understanding of the other person *and* yourself, especially regarding strengths, weaknesses, work styles and needs.
- You use this information to develop and manage a healthy working relationship – one that is compatible with both people’s work styles and assets, is characterised by mutual expectations and meets the most critical needs of the other person.”¹

Warning signs are if:

- The lines of communication are constricted and information is not flowing freely
- You are not able to make progress in your work, and your contribution to organisational objectives is suffering
- The relationship is strained and the needs of both parties are not respected or acknowledged

Things I can do to improve my effectiveness in managing up:

- **Take the time to understand your boss.** What are *their* goals and priorities? What are *their* pressures and challenges? What does *their* boss expect of them? What are the organisational ‘hot buttons’ right now? What do you

think they are particularly good at? How can they help you? In what areas are they less strong? What are their ‘blind spots’? How can you help them?

- **Get out the ‘long mirror’ and answer the same questions for yourself.** What are *your* key strengths and weaknesses? What do you like doing? What do you tend to avoid? What is your preferred way of working with a boss? Hands on or hands off? What do you need from them?
- **Understand how your boss wishes to work with you.** What does your boss expect of you? How do they prefer to work with their staff? What issues do they want to be updated on and with what frequency? Do they want the detail or the big picture? How do they want to be informed – by email, by phone, by a formal meeting, by a report? Are they a reader or a listener?²
- **Develop a mutual understanding around how you will work together.** Discuss this explicitly. Develop a way of working that suits both your styles. Advocate your preferences and expectations and inquire about their preferences and expectations. In exploring this consider:
 - Does your boss like to delegate? How will they oversee what has been delegated? Is there clarity over the desired outcome, expectations and standards of performance? What are the progress / review checkpoints?
 - Do they like you to come to them with a recommendation (a ‘fully cooked idea’)? Or do they prefer you to present a few ‘half cooked’ ideas that you can collectively explore?
 - On what issues do *they* like to be involved in / make decisions? On what issues do they want *you* to make the decisions? What information do they need from you? Anticipate the possible questions and be prepared.
 - What level of supervision sits comfortably with you? What do you need more of? What do you need less of? How do you balance the needs of both parties?
- **Focus heavily on facilitating communication.** Initiate regular connections with your boss, and keep the lines of communication flowing. Regularly ask

¹ Managing your Boss, Gabano & Kotter HBR, January 2005

² A *listener* likes to hear your thoughts then have you follow up with a memo. A *reader* likes to receive the memo with the background information first, then discuss it with you.

yourself, what do they need to know; when and how? Help yourself and your boss by keeping on top of the communication flow. Communicate the good and the not-so-good stories – ensure there are no surprises. And make sure the communication is two way. Listen and ask questions.

- **Put a conscious effort into the relationship with your boss.** If your relationship with your boss is rocky, it is *you* who must begin to manage it. At the heart of any relationship transformation is the transformation of ourselves. What behaviours am I demonstrating that are contributing to the situation? Am I fully aligned to what the group is trying to achieve? What combination of knowledge, skills, networks and communication channels do I need to draw on? When you take the time to cultivate a productive working relationship, everyone benefits.
- **Focus more on results than on ‘efforts’.** Just like you, your boss’ time is limited. Don’t waste time on issues that have a small impact on results. Focus on the issues that make a real difference. Help make the **connection** between your results and the contribution to the larger needs of the organisation. As Jim Collins discovered in ‘Good to Great’, the most successful business leaders are those who always put the organisation’s interests ahead of their own.
- **“When presenting ideas to your boss, realise it is your responsibility to sell not their responsibility to buy”³.**
Communicating knowledge is often a greater challenge than possessing knowledge. What is your compelling argument? And back this up with a realistic cost-benefit analysis.
- **Realise that your boss is just as human as you are...don’t say “I am amazed that someone at this level...”⁴**
Remember to put yourself in their shoes for a moment. What is their perspective? What is going on in their world right now? Focus more on helping them than judging them.



- **Use your influencing levers wisely.** Clearly explain your intentions. Keep your promises, respond to requests quickly and be honest in all of your dealings. Be trustworthy and dependable, show loyalty and commitment (refer to the ‘Influencing - tips and hints’ for further ideas)
- **If the situation calls for it, have the ‘difficult conversation’.** You may not always agree with your boss, and when it is an issue that is important to you, it is healthy to communicate your position. Do this in private, however and never reveal to others what was discussed. Publicly demonstrate support for the final decision – whatever it is. A healthy working relationship is one where both parties are prepared to respectfully facilitate an exchange of views.
- **Ask for feedback from your boss.** Approach feedback with a learning orientation. Feedback can help confirm you are on the right track and propel you forward. Feedback can also help take you out of your ‘blind spot’. If the feedback is not as you would expect, look at the situation through new **lenses**. Be aware of the difference between the facts of the situation and the way you have interpreted those facts. For example...
 - **Reverse Lens** - What would the other person in this interchange say and in what ways might that be true?
 - **Long lens** - How will I most likely view this situation in six months?
 - **Wide lens** - Regardless of the outcome of this issue, how can I grow and learn from it?⁵
- **Show strong leadership by being a good follower.** Role model what you want your staff to do with you. Effective followers manage themselves well. They also demonstrate a commitment to what the organisation is trying to achieve, and maximise their own contribution towards that. Effective followers are also courageous, honest, credible, enthusiastic and self-reliant. Effective followership is critical for creating high performing organisation and for maximizing your own success.



³ Influencing up, Marshall Goldsmith, Leadership Excellence Publishing

⁴ Influencing up, Marshall Goldsmith, Leadership Excellence Publishing

⁵ “Manage your Energy, Not Your Time”, HBR October 2007, Schwartz & McCarthy