

How to manage your boss

Business schools and training courses carefully avoid teaching the things people really want to know. They normally teach explicit knowledge: things like strategy, accounting and marketing. That is useful, but not useful enough. Most people succeed with know-how skills, not know-what skills. In the words of one CEO:

I hire most people for their technical skills. I fire most for their interpersonal skills.

The three critical know-how skills are:

1. How do I make things happen?
2. How do I succeed?
3. How do I manage my boss?

There is plenty of help available for managing subordinates, teams or peers. There is very little help available for managing the boss. Given that the boss is the single most important relationship for most people in most organizations, this is a glaring omission.

Learning to manage your boss is not just about career survival: if you can learn to manage your boss, you will have learned many principles that can be applied to managing both teams and networks. In today's flat organizations we have to learn to manage people over whom we have no formal authority. Learning to manage your boss is an ideal way of developing these skills.

Successful management of a boss has four elements:

1. Decoding the rules of survival and success.
2. Building trust: avoiding career limiting moves.
3. Building a career network.
4. Turning moments of truth into moments of magic.

1. Decoding the rules

In theory, every boss should sit down with a new team member and have an expectations exchange about performance and process. In theory, accidents are avoidable, crime can be prevented and wars should never happen. Practice rarely lives up to theory. In practice, new team members are pretty much left to figure it out for themselves. Decoding the formula is essential, and there are no universal answers.

The easiest way to find out about the rules of success and survival is to ask anyone except the boss. The boss naively thinks that they do not have any unique or odd style: they simply represent best management practice. To ask the boss about his or her style is to cause both confusion and defensiveness. But a quick chat round the water cooler with other team members or peers will rapidly identify all the foibles of each manager you work with.

To help you think about the possibilities, below is a list of some style trade-offs for bosses:

- big picture -----detail
- positive ----- cynical
- task focus ----- people focus
- open ----- defensive
- controlling ----- empowering
- analyzing ----- action
- prompt ----- tardy
- written- ----- spoken word
- numbers ----- words
- introvert----- extravert
- risk averse -----risk taking
- outcomes ----- process

Some of these are consistent with the detail different personality tests. But often the things that really upset bosses or please them are much simpler to identify, as above. To put the list into action, rate your self and your boss on the scales above and notice the glaring differences.

This is a simple way of outlining the characteristics that really make your boss different. You can choose any set of trade offs that you think are important. What counts at this stage is gaining insight about your boss: worry about your own style later.

2. Building trust

Identifying the style of your boss is important. But fortunately, there are also a few universal do's and don'ts which apply to all bosses. Starting on the

positive side, we identified a few standard expectations of team members in interviews and surveys with over 1,000 bosses. The five most common expectations that bosses had of team members were:

1. Adaptability.
2. Self-confidence.
3. Proactivity.
4. Reliability.
5. Ambition.

These are relatively low hurdles for team members to jump over. Many team members manage to fall over them: just by consistently displaying the five characteristics above you will be ahead of the pack. Many team members fall into the traps of excessive analysis, negativity, can't-do, backwards looking and complaining. That is not a recipe for impressing any boss.

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Bosses do not like being upstaged and need to feel they are in control. Good surprises are not good, but bad surprises are even worse. Bosses can deal with bad news, provided they hear it in private first and early enough to do something about it. If the first they hear about a problem is on the management grapevine, then be prepared for a very tricky discussion with the boss.

Perhaps the greatest sin of all is disloyalty. The essence of the relationship between the boss and the team member is built on trust: once trust disappears on either side, then the relationship is effectively over. Trust reflects a universal psychological contract between the boss and the team.

The boss has to deliver on two things:

1. Tasks: deliver a good mix of meaningful work and provide the support to make it happen.
2. Career: deliver on career expectations and promises around pay, bonus and promotions.

If the boss fails to deliver, team members start to walk. The result of conducting dozens of exit interviews over the years fully supports the adage that people do not leave their organization: they leave their boss.

3. Building a career network

Some bosses are tyrants who have a "my way or no way" approach. Working for them is like experiencing serfdom all over again. At the other extreme there are bosses who are so weak that they are never able to promote or

support their staff properly. Either way, depending on a single boss is very career limiting. If the boss takes a dislike to you, you are toast. If the boss messes up and leaves the organization, you are toast.

It makes sense to build a career network beyond your own boss. Get to know people who sit along side your boss and the people in HR who run the assignment and promotion process. Find and get to know the people who really make the decisions on assignments and promotions: they may well work around the formal HR processes to get the people they really want. Find a powerful sponsor in the organization: someone who is at least two levels above you. They can be useful coaches and can guide you towards the right assignment and the right bosses.

4. Moments of truth to moments of magic

Some moments of truth are entirely predictable, and need to be managed well. The three most important moments of truth are:

1. Assignments.
2. Budgets.
3. Major presentations and meetings.

Managing the assignment process has already been covered in building your career network. That leaves budgets and presentations.

Budgets are, in theory, rational processes to allocate resources. In practice, they are deeply political acts in which managers bid for as much resource in return for as little output as possible. Naïve managers accept the “challenging” or “stretching” budget target: they commit themselves to 12 months of stress and overwork followed by a poor bonus. Smarter managers play hardball in the budget process and ensure they get targets that can be beaten: welcome to an easier year, better bonus and faster promotion.

Presentations are set piece events where you see power flow to or from someone. This is not the place for a dissertation on how to make presentations. But there are some simple rules:

- Get help on both substance and style:
- Get the style right.
- Understand your audience.

Other moments of truth are less predictable, but you still need to be ready for them. You never know when you will bump into the CEO or finance director: maybe at a conference, or in a lift or at the canteen. You have a choice: you can stay dumbstruck like most people, or you can say something.

Whatever you do, be relentlessly positive, and focused on solutions and actions. To senior managers who are used to hearing problems all day, you

will be like a breath of fresh air.

Managing your boss is not rocket science: it is common sense. That may be why so many people find it difficult. But if you can manage your boss well, you will find your career accelerating. It is an art worth learning.

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