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You and Your Boss: managing upward

Most of us have at least one horror story about a bad boss. Considering the amount of quality time you spend on the job, your boss can make your daily life a joy or misery. Bosses can have a tremendous impact on both your financial and mental well-being. They may have significant say over your salary and bonus and/or a huge amount of clout when it comes to your career and even your ability to get a job somewhere else.

My belief is that people work for bosses as much as they work for companies. By that I mean that given a good boss in a good company, employees are far less likely to leave for greener pastures. No wonder that, according to industry surveys, the top reason people leave their jobs is dissatisfaction with an immediate supervisor. So, successfully managing your boss might be the most important thing you learn as you progress in your career.

If I tell you to learn how to manage your boss, it is most likely that you think, "He wants me to curry my boss's favor and involve myself in politicking activities." But, "managing your boss" does not mean going out of your way to please him or her or to score political points for personal gain.

Rather, I mean the process of consciously working with one's superior to obtain the best possible outcomes for the company, the boss and oneself; a win-win situation all round.

The fact is, studies carried out by researchers showed that effective managers recognize that a good working relationship with superiors is essential to being effective in the execution of their tasks and responsibilities.

In corporate America today, it's likely you'll change jobs (either voluntarily or otherwise) five or six times, so whether you like it or not, you'll have to work with many different types of bosses. Employees are not powerless in this relationship. In fact, they have significantly more control than most realize. How do you go about managing your boss?

For starters, don't be afraid of your boss. Be respectful, but not scared. You are both important to the company, and a good boss knows that. You need each other to get the work done.

Next, do your job as well as you can. Bosses who have tangible, measurable evidence of your value to the company can point to the successes generated by their department. If you contribute to the supervisor's success, you will position yourself as a team player and a dependable, valuable employee.

Trust is key to developing a good relationship with anyone, especially your boss. Nothing will destroy trust faster than not delivering on a commitment. When you keep a promise that trust grows. Over-promise or under-deliver, and you destroy trust.

The first key to building trust with your boss is to establish communication and reliability. Communication is critical to building trust. Renee Smith, executive vice president of an

investment services firm, was faced with a "terrific" boss who had no prior experience managing an investment operation. "Since he lacked experience, he didn't completely trust his staff," says Smith. "He was really worried that someone would do something that would blindside or embarrass him."

Renee's strategy was to help her boss understand her role and the operation. "Very early on I implemented a formal communication system-both verbal and in writing, to keep him fully informed of everything I was doing," says Smith. "I gave him detailed weekly and monthly reports that laid out exactly what I was doing and why. In this way I educated him and gradually gained his trust."

There's another strategy that will earn you respect with any boss: Bring them solutions instead of problems. An example of a boss who that is impossible to pin down: "When it came to giving production goals or providing direction, he was always so vague it was impossible to know what his expectations were-and forget about getting input on designing a business plan." This manager, let's call him Tom, never got one written goal or target. The best he could do was to say, "Make it work."

This boss was trying to avoid responsibility for failure or really didn't know how to do his job. Since Tom didn't have any written goals, "he could easily say that I didn't achieve them." He really didn't have a clue how to grow the business, so it was easier to leave everything up to Tom.

The solution: Tom knew taking problems to his boss would be pointless. So he worked on offering solutions. "I always provided him with an overabundance of information," he says. "Whenever there was a problem or decisions to be made, I provided very specific recommendations and solutions." No boss wants to hear about problems. It's all about solutions."

Part of providing solutions is bearing in mind the stress and pressures the boss may be facing. I think it's important to respect the Boss's time. They've got their own deadlines to meet and strategies to implement. You may represent 5% of their problems, but want 50% of their time. Don't expect your boss to just drop everything when you have a problem or need their time.

As professors Gabarro and Kotter (Harvard Business Review, 1979, and reprinted in May 1993, entitled "Managing Your Boss"), discovered in their studies, effective managers recognize the importance of managing their superiors and took time and effort to develop a relationship that suits both person's styles, needs, strengths and limitations so that informational or decision gaps do not interfere with the execution of critical tasks or strategies.

First, you need to have a good knowledge and understanding of yourself, and your superior's work styles, strengths or limitations, and needs.

Then, you must be able to make use of this knowledge to develop a working relationship that brings about a win-win situation.

- **Understanding Your Boss:** in order to be effective, managers need to make the effort to appreciate the objectives, thoughts, and working styles of their superior.

For instance, what are their long-term concern, the work pressure they face, their special strengths, prejudices or blind spots and the like.

Because bosses are also human, one must accept that their basic personality structure and habitual work patterns are set and won't change - not at least in the short-term.

Therefore, an awareness or sensitivity to our superiors, personality, likes and dislikes, will help us go a long way in developing a cordial and professional relationship.

Once such a relationship is in place; communication gaps and decisional mistakes will quite naturally be reduced or removed totally.

- **Know Your Own Style:** knowing about your boss's style is one half of the picture. The other half is understanding your personal characteristics.

While we have no direct control over other people's behavior, we certainly should exercise a certain measure of restraint over the way we respond or react toward others, especially our bosses.

For example, there was this case about a department manager who always got into disagreements with his superior. Being a typical boss, he stood his ground even when his arguments were flimsy.

His subordinate's expertise in his area enabled him to attack his boss' assumptions.

Here we have a typical case of a young and talented manager who believes strongly in calling a spade a spade. Fortunately for him, a colleague managed to persuade him that his mannerism with the superior was not so appropriate.

He soon learned to withhold his impatience and impulse. At the same time, he learned to be more apologetic whenever he became aware that his sharp tongue had offended his peers, superiors, or others.

Conclusion

There will always be some of us who will be turned off by the very idea of "managing your boss", let alone the act of doing it.

But in corporate life, the burden of consciously working with our superior, establishing a healthy superior-subordinate relationship so that together we can achieve the best possible results for all, falls on the subordinates.

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