

The Art of Managing Up

Wayne Turk

About 45 years ago, a satirical play (later a movie) called *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* opened on Broadway. It offered a method of moving up in the executive suite that included a little murder and a lot of mishap. There are better ways (even if you do have a boss you've fantasized about murdering). One of those methods is *managing up*. According to Thomas Zuber and Erika James, "managing up is the process of consciously working with your boss to obtain the best possible results for you, your boss, and your organization. This is not political maneuvering or kissing up. Rather, it is a deliberate effort to bring understanding and cooperation to a relationship between individuals who often have different perspectives."

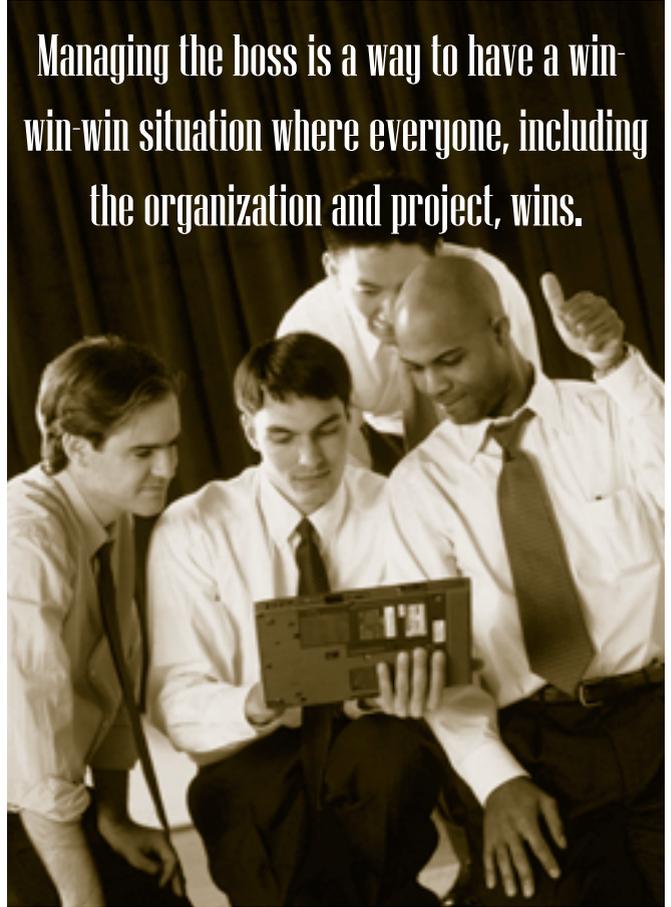
Management or Manipulation?

Managing up or managing the boss sounds good in theory, but isn't it just another term for manipulating the boss or being the boss's toady? No! Managing the boss is a way to have a win-win-win situation where everyone, including the organization and project, wins. Failure to manage the boss can result in misunderstandings about expectations and cause wasted time and effort on tasks not in line with organizational goals or the project's needs. And looking at it from a purely self-serving perspective, career progress rarely happens if you don't manage your boss successfully.

Team member, project manager, or program manager—you have a boss, or in most cases, multiple bosses. You have to worry about those bosses and their needs. Having more than one boss makes work more difficult because you have to consider the needs or preferences of each of them. But it's still doable.

If you are a manager at any level, you have to think about managing both up and down. Some managers pay attention to managing *either* their own bosses *or* those people who report to them. It is the managers who only manage up who give managing the boss a less-than-stellar reputation. They appear to be the suck-ups or toadies; subordinates assume they don't care about them and may withhold their respect or slack off in their work. On the other hand, the ones who only manage down can't advocate for their team or gain buy-ins for the project's endeavors from those up the chain. Successful managers

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pay attention to managing both directions and communicating with their peers.

In this article, I will deal with managing up. If you are curious about successfully managing down, see "10 Rules for Success as a Manager" (*Defense AT&L*, August-September 2004).

Guidelines for Managing Up

Communicate. And make sure the communication is two-way. Most of the guidelines in this article are related to communication. Good communications skills are the basis for being able to succeed in almost every situation. Communication with the boss can be verbal or written. Some bosses are readers, meaning they prefer to receive information in written form. Others are listeners, meaning they prefer to get their information verbally. In DoD, get-

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ting information to your boss may be a briefing from you to him (and others). Listeners need to hear the information first, then they can consume a written version. Readers want the story on paper first so that they have some time to digest and understand the issue before meeting to discuss it. If you want your ideas to be heard, understood, and acted upon, make it easy for your boss by communicating in the manner with which he is most comfortable. You'll be meeting your boss's needs as well as your own. But make sure that the communication is two-way. You have to understand the boss's wants and decisions. Listen and ask questions if you aren't sure. Then it is a good idea to feed it back to confirm that you got it right.

No surprises—don't surprise the boss. Even good surprises can backfire on you. Most readers can cite examples of bringing the boss what they thought was good news, only to find out later that it that it wasn't so good after all. Let her know what is happening with the project on a regular basis so that she can brief her boss. It may be a quick meeting in her office; a daily, weekly, or monthly e-mail; or some other exchange. Full-blown interim progress reports (formal meetings to discuss the project status) on a regular schedule can help make sure that neither of you is surprised.

Provide solutions, not problems. There are going to be problems with your project. Every project has them. But when you let your boss know about those problems, give him your proposed solution(s). That shows him that you have thought the situations through. There are supervisors who seem to want to hear only good news; they don't want to hear about problems. Those bosses represent a particular challenge. It is up to you to help your boss face problems head on with courage and innovation. For the good of the project and the organization, you must communicate problems and failures with the successes, but do so delicately and appropriately. That's when providing him proposed solutions to the problems can really pay off.

Be honest and trustworthy. Dishonesty, covering up problems or failures, and trying to sweep things under the rug will only hurt you and the project in the long run. The truth will come out eventually. Bad news doesn't get any better with age. A key element in managing your boss is building trust by being trustworthy. Most people are dependable, hardworking, and have a desire to do a good job, but because of misunderstandings or mismatched priorities, some end up inappropriately labeled as problem children. To avoid that label, maintain your honesty and dependability. One way of doing this is honoring commitments, project schedules, constraints, and suspenses. The best way is just honest and forthright communication.

Be loyal and committed. She's your boss and you owe her your loyalty and commitment, and she owes you her support. If you don't do your part, chances are that she won't do hers. And that's bad for you and the project.

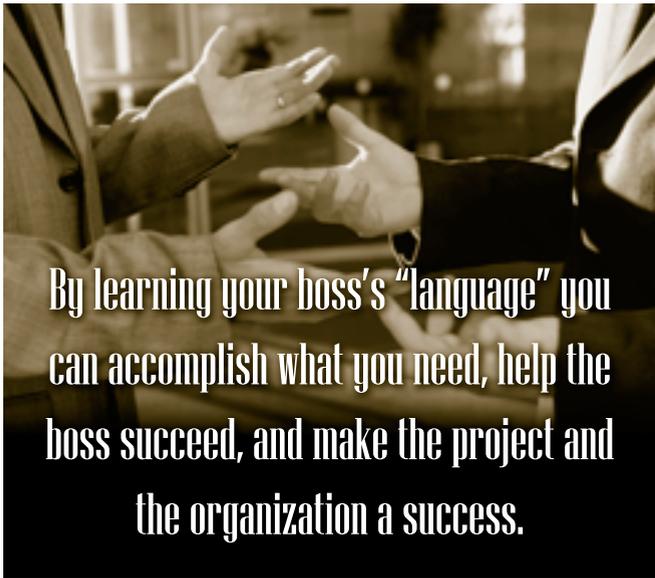
Understand your boss's perspective and agenda. That way, you can align your priorities with your boss's priorities. Put yourself in his shoes. While many people think that they have an understanding of their boss's goals and pressures, they don't always understand the strengths, weaknesses, aspirations, and work styles of their supervisors, or the pressures and constraints on them. Exploring these will help you identify commonalities you never knew existed and gain a little insight on how to better interact effectively with your boss.

Understand your boss's preferences and try to conform to them. If she wants a daily report on what has been accomplished, give it to her. If she wants the big picture and not the details, give it to her that way. If she wants something in a specific format, give it to her. That doesn't mean that you can't try to show her a better way, but remember to use tact and diplomacy. If you get crosswise with your boss, even over something minor, you may never be able to undo the damage.

One of the worst mistakes you can make is to assume you know what your boss expects. Many bosses don't spell out their expectations, and the burden of discovery falls to you. If he doesn't give you the information that you need, initiate one or a series of informal discussions on "our" objectives. This can help your boss clarify and communicate his ideas, plans, and needs to you; and it gives you the chance to communicate your own ideas as well. Together, set realistic expectations that you both agree on. They include expectations on schedule, costs, and the final product. The emphasis is on "realistic." Don't set expectations too high or you will ruin your credibility when they are not met. Don't intentionally set them low. That won't help you either.

Understand your own management style and take responsibility for its effect on others. Developing an effective working relationship with your boss requires that you understand yourself and your management style. Recognize your own strengths, weaknesses, goals, and personal needs; how you respond to being managed; and how others respond to you. Be aware of the effect that you have on others and their reaction to you, especially those under you. If you don't, you could be in for a surprise when you meet with the boss, especially at appraisal time. She probably talks with some of your people and has an idea of their reactions to you.

Depend on your boss's strengths and use them. You need to determine his strengths. Whether those strengths are communication, seeing the big picture, resource man-



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agement, new ideas, or something else, go to your boss for his expertise. Get him to use his particular skills for the project. Remember, though, that time is a precious commodity for most managers. Effectively managing your boss requires that you respect his time. Every request made of the boss uses up his time and resources, so make sure your requests are necessary. Use his strengths, but if you can do it yourself, don't waste his time.

Recognize your boss's weaknesses and compensate for them. She is not going to be good at everything. It is up to you to figure out where she's weak and provide your support in those areas. You might just want to intentionally try doing something to make life easier for your boss. Maybe you can build the slides for her briefings, track the finances, monitor the schedule, or provide the support that she needs in some area. Perhaps your boss will spend that extra time or effort that you saved her to advocate for your project's needs.

Be aware of your manager's hot buttons and pet peeves. Is it being late to meetings or not contributing, sloppy memos or e-mails, swearing, a loud radio? Sounds obvious, but whatever they are, consider them land mines to be avoided. Ignoring them (or not understanding them) can sour your relationship with the boss. And that can mean an unsuccessful project because you didn't get the support that you needed—or worst case, it can be career suicide for you.

Request feedback—and learn to accept it. Request periodic feedback if you aren't getting it. Don't wait for the annual appraisal to find out the boss's opinion of you and your work. If you get bad feedback, discuss your concerns, but do it on a mature level, not emotionally or confrontationally. As in a marriage, the best approach is non-adversarial. Listen to what he says and try to act on it.

Don't go over the boss's head or behind her back. That is not the way to manage up and can permanently ruin the relationship with the boss. Go to her first. If it is something very serious and she does nothing, you might have to go over her head. In some cases she may be the serious problem and you can't confront her. But going over her head should be a last resort only if:

- Your project is on the line, and there is an urgent problem that your manager continues to ignore
- Your boss is doing something illegal
- Your boss has a serious physical illness, mental illness, or substance abuse problem that you are aware of
- Your boss is doing something (e.g., sexual harassment or contracting irregularities) that could lead to a lawsuit and/or bad publicity.

In such cases, be very careful to keep the information highly confidential, discussing it with only anyone who needs to know. Document your conversation with that person in an e-mail or memo for the record, and save a copy for yourself. And always remember to tread carefully. You could be mistaken.

Managing Up: An Essential Tool

"[Managing up] sounds simple, but managers, and everyone else, need to learn this basic concept," says Richard L. Knowdell, author of *Building a Career Development Program: Nine Steps for Effective Implementation*. "If we want someone to understand what we have to say, we must learn to speak their language, rather than expect them to learn ours." By learning your boss's "language" you can accomplish what you need, help the boss succeed, and make the project and the organization a success.

Adam Khan says in *Self Help Stuff That Works*, that the way to manage up is to treat your boss like your liege lord. He says that by making that your attitude, it changes the whole environment. "Your attitude toward a person creates that person. Interact with someone with a chip on your shoulder and the person will usually respond defensively. Approach someone with friendliness and cooperation and the person is likely to respond in kind. We play a part in creating the way someone treats us." Excellent advice.

Too many people perceive that managing up is brown-nosing or trying to curry favor with the boss. They consider it manipulative. But it's not. Being rebellious or adversarial, or stonewalling the boss won't get you or your project anywhere. Managing up is one of the tools to engender success.

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