Managing Upwards

An essential skill for everyone

Why it is worth doing?

In an organised world, there are always people with authority over us. Without their consent and support, how can we follow conviction, exercise judgment, use creative ability, achieve constructive results, or create conditions by which others can do the same? Managing superiors is essential. Devoting a quarter of our time and ability to that effort is not too much.

From *Birth of the chaordic age* by Dee Hock

Many managers do not spend enough time managing upwards for a variety of reasons

- They fail to appreciate how important it is...
- They have other things to concentrate on.....
- They don't like their boss.....

If you fall into one of the categories above bear this in mind.

Your boss may or may not be more experienced and wiser than you, may or may not be more in tune with the organisation in which you work AND they almost certainly have more power and influence. You can succeed despite, in spite of or even to spite your boss and none of these options is really the best approach.

This short paper outlines ideas and suggestions to help you manage your boss more appropriately, get what you want from the relationship and enable you to perform effectively and develop your capabilities.

What do you want from your boss?

Do you know what you really want from your boss? Many people give this little thought and yet when they do they are often surprised by the positive results.

Having spoken to many people about this issue the four most common wishes are -

- Clarity about direction, goals/objectives and outcomes
- A clear view about how their performance will be evaluated and measured, especially "what are your expectations about how I do my job?"
- Appropriate support for my style and preferences
- Appropriate rewards which will include regular "thank you's" as well as money.

Are these what you would like and do you get them met?

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How well do you know your boss?

Knowing your boss well gives you the greatest chance of having a good relationship and getting your expectations and wishes met. Here are three models to help you.

Myers Briggs Type Indicator - MBTI looks at four dimensions.

Extroversion [E] and Introversion [I] This dichotomy indicates where you get your energy. An E gets it from outside them, while an I tends to get it from inner thoughts. So an I subordinate may experience an E boss as very outgoing and interactive. An E subordinate may experience an I boss as very controlled and thoughtful.

Sensing [S] and Intuition [N] This dichotomy indicates different ways of viewing situations. A typical S thinks in lots of small steps, while an N thinks in great bounds. So a likely outcome of an S and an N together could be if, say, you had boss N and subordinate S: subordinate says boss always talks in generalities, so I don't really know what he wants me to do. From the other perspective – boss S, subordinate N – subordinate says that the boss wants concrete detail and never explores possibilities.

Thinking [T] and Feeling [F] scores These indicate different approaches to people issues. A T will often fail to consider feelings adequately, while an F can be oversensitive. You might experience a dialogue with an F boss (as a T subordinate) as excessively people centred. Alternatively, as an F subordinate you might experience your T boss as insensitive and very tasky.

Judging [J] and Perceiving [P] scores These may indicate very different views on managing your time. A typical J will tend to regard time very specifically, while a P sees it in a very fluid manner.

Six traits - Professor Adrian Furnham has outlined a set of characteristics for identifying differences 'between me and my boss'.

How bright? – quick on the uptake -
Does your boss pick things up quickly, especially unfamiliar things? Does your boss tolerate staff who don't pick things us as quickly as they do? Bright bosses tend to be more tolerant of change, and more adaptable/flexible. You are likely to be more successful managing upwards if you flatter their speed of thinking. If your boss is less bright than you, handle them sensitively - give them support and suggestions. Beware letting them become dependent on you - they may block your progress.

'Neuroticism – or negative affectivity'
This is a measure of how well your boss copes with stress. The stable, 'non-neurotic' boss copes well. The neurotic boss can be over sensitive, moody and unpredictable. If your boss fits into this category, offer lots of support, re-assurance and help. If they are overly neurotic, your best way of managing upwards may be to leave them alone.

Introversion – extroversion
This is not the same as I-E on MBTI. Extroverts are active, expressive and impulsive. You need to stimulate and excite them. Introverts, on the other hand, don't show the same excitement for action and overt display. Support and manage them by allowing them time to think things through or by being their 'extrovert' spokesperson.

Conscientiousness – organisation, reliability, prudence
Conscientious managers get things done. If they overplay this trait they can become tight fisted and rather mean spirited. The manager lacking conscientiousness can be a real struggle. When this trait is taken to an extreme, they may use time, money, resources and feelings inappropriately. For this kind of boss, take care. Provide them with back up and support while getting other people to notice how much support you are giving them.

Agreeableness
This is fairly straightforward. Agreeable people are always easier to get on with and when they are your boss this is no exception. If they are not agreeable – if they display signs of cynicism, sarcasm and suspiciousness – then take care and even consider looking for another place to work.

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Creativity and intellect
Those managers who score highly in this trait are usually open, imaginative and insightful. Support them by offering ideas and suggestions. In the case of managers who score poorly, you may experience them as showing resistance or hostility to new concepts, so take care when offering ideas, suggestions or seeking to make changes.

Professor Furnham's six traits provide a valuable insight into how to manage your boss. If you are lucky enough to have a boss who is quick and bright, stable, agreeable, open, conscientious and imaginative, then be thankful and regard yourself as very lucky. If not, think about how you can manage upwards more effectively.

The GRID - Personal Style and Effectiveness © Ian Saunders 1984

In 'Where my emotions go' Out			
	Analysing	Reasoning	Directing
	Cooperating	Involving	Instructing
	Supporting	Suggesting	Inspiring

Ask 'How we control others' **Tell**

The GRID outlines nine behavioural styles. These styles are based on a varying mix of behaviours that we use to control others, ranging from ASK to TELL and what we do with our emotions, in other words do we channel them INWARDS or OUTWARDS.

To use the GRID for managing upwards (or to work effectively with anyone) ask yourself the following questions.

1. Is this person left or right of me? – do they ask more or tell more?

People to the right of you tend to
- like more freedom than you and enjoy power,
- be more active and energetic in getting things done,
- like praise to be in public and blame others for things that go wrong.

People to the left of you tend to
- seek direction and re-assurance about actions,
- value procedure and policy as providing stability,
- prefer someone else to 'own' things and blame themselves if things go wrong.

2. Is this person more up (task) or down (people) then me?

People more 'up' than you tend to
- focus on the task and fail to consider the people aspects adequately,
- seek safety in structure and order, value facts and figures and analysis
- want to be valued for the work that they do.

People more 'down' than you tend to
- seek personal recognition, value and feel comfortable with emotions,
- want to be respected as a 'people' person,
- seek out positive discussions.

What does your boss want from you?

A significant part of managing upwards is to know about the priorities and challenges that your boss faces so that you can help make these easier for them. Do you know them?
For example - What keeps your boss awake at night? Do you know?

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The following are some questions that you might like to ask yourself about your boss!

1. What do I see them spending their time on and what do they do when time is limited?
3. What do they seem happy not to do (from a positive standpoint)?
4. What do they often talk about?
5. What are they anxious to do well?
6. What regular times in the month do they stay in their office?
7. What customer problems keep cropping up?

Spending time gathering this information will be valuable in helping you manage upwards. And all might hold answers to 'what keeps your boss awake at night?'

Always think about how what you are doing might be helping (or hindering) your boss. The person who is successful at managing upwards will make sure the balance is in favour of helping their boss.

Getting alignment with your boss and offering support

Alignment can be thought about in three areas.

- Alignment over personal style differences
- Alignment over roles, responsibilities and objectives
- Alignment in relation to personal aspirations

Consider what you can do to get better alignment in these three areas.

Once you have found out about your boss's role you can – whilst understanding their style and their differences from you – work out the best way to support them.

- Do they need you to be more proactive and to take the lead?
- Are you better offering support and suggestions?
- Do they encourage you to highlight problems and issues or simply to overcome them and report success?

Look at your particular situation and think of some questions of your own that will help you to understand how best to support your boss.

Encouraging your staff to manage you!

Having worked through how to manage your own boss, you will be very confident of enabling your staff to lead and manage you!

Allow yourself time to consider the following points.

- Do you allow your staff enough time to find out about you?
- Do you allow your staff enough space to do things their own way?
- How much risk do you take in allowing your staff to take on new projects?
- Do you disclose and seek feedback about yourself?
- Do you seek out challenging projects and opportunities for your staff and express delight when they successfully complete them?
- Are you truly comfortable as your most able staff 'accelerate past you'?

Think of other questions that might indicate how well you enable your staff to know you, get the best opportunities and flourish under your leadership.

And finally - **do you listen and share enough?**

References

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