



# Making It in Management

Make your boss work for you.

In my work as an executive coach, I see people fail and succeed in their work because of the way they manage the relationship with just one person – their boss. If you want to get your job done well – and if you want to move up – you have no choice but to manage up. Here are some strategies that can help you make your relationship with your boss a meaningful and rewarding one.

## Get on the same page

Start by knowing what you're here to do. You may think that if you're running sales it's to increase sales – but it's never that simple. Which new products to push, what information to share with product developers, what to outsource, which channels to focus on are all directions and decisions that you can make.

But your boss, too, may have some very specific ideas about where to focus. Find out first before you head quickly in possibly the wrong direction. I repeatedly see major problems multiply due to a lack of alignment over job priorities. Too often,

there's a big gap between our hopes, our thinking and what is really said and what we hear.

Last year, I worked with an IT executive at a pharmaceutical company who thought he was sent to Japan to introduce the latest technology on database management. On the other hand, his boss who headed IT for the region really wanted him to bring the fractious team together. The local manager schooled his staff in the new technologies, but his team and his boss grew more discontented as the relationships within the team further deteriorated.

The regional exec thought he had communicated the importance of focusing on the team and the local manager assumed he was doing his job perfectly by concentrating on the technology. When I talked with each separately, there was a high level of dissatisfaction with the other's performance and management style. I asked the local manager if he knew what the regional manager wanted. His reply? "I never asked him." The remedy we brokered? A conversation about responsibilities and priorities.

## Take a lesson from the Japanese management playbook: Let everyone share in success, and thank your team when work goes well.

### Take the lead

John Kotter, a former Harvard Business School professor and top expert on change, says that people in leadership under-communicate direction by a factor of 10. When there's this much potential for under-communication, initiate the conversation to make sure you and your boss are in sync.

If your boss leaves the priorities and strategy to you, start with your own list, detailing your focus, priorities and the results you expect. You can send it to your boss by e-mail, but the discussion is as important as the list. Schedule some telephone or face time to go over the list together. It's the discussions that will make the relationship work.

Know what you'll need from your boss, too. Is it money, support from HQ, more staff, time on your boss's schedule? Ask for what you need. Priorities shift in every organization, so have this discussion more often than regular budget reviews.

If you have two bosses, it's the same process, but at least three times as difficult. Make up your list and ask them to sit down – preferably with you – and reach agreement. If there is disagreement between them, it'll be up to you to carefully shepherd the list of priorities and expectations by each boss, one at a time. If there's a turf war, don't leave it up to them. You could be forgotten – or be the first casualty.

### Action is louder

No one can argue with results. Results buy you leeway to do and get more of what you want, and results make the noise of organizational politics fade into the background. Michelle Kristula-Green, president of Leo Burnett Asia Pacific, told me: "I'm a firm believer that results and actions speak louder than words." Put simply: Know what to do, and then do your job!

When the results are in, you don't need to brag to your boss about what you've done. No one likes a show-off anyway. Take a lesson from the Japanese

### ◀ SNAPSHOT ▶

- Know what the boss wants
- Take the lead to ensure understanding
- Deliver results, not just empty words
- When something goes wrong, don't hide it
- Express your feelings honestly
- Be prepared for when the boss is away
- Adapt to understand your new superior
- Change yourself, not the boss

management playbook: Let everyone share in success, and thank your team when work goes well. This enhances your stature in the eyes of your boss and the people who work with you everyday.

### Tell the truth

If it doesn't look like you'll expand at the rate you expected, if the data from the employee survey is embarrassing, if the global strategy isn't working in Fukuoka, let the boss know. Don't attempt to hide what is really going on. Save your surprises for birthday parties, not for the boss.

Philippe Wauquaire, who handles administrative matters in Japan for the global translation company Jonckers, told me: "Transparency and honesty are essential. Never push things under the carpet for the sake of convenience! Never try to hide mistakes or lie. It will come back to you."

He's right. About five years ago, a banking friend met the global CEO of a competitor at an ACCJ "Meet and Greet Function." They talked about the Japanese market and the opportunities each of them had pursued. The CEO was surprised to hear that my friend's bank had been successful in a line of business that the CEO had been told was still closed to foreign companies. Who told you that?, my friend asked. The CEO replied, "The head of my Japan operations."

Would you want to find yourself having to explain what you had claimed when your boss confronts you later? Far better to tell the truth from the get-go.

### Integrity matters

Frank Maher, who retired three years ago as president of Asia Pacific for Rohm and Haas, goes one step further. According to Maher, "It's important to speak your mind honestly." In difficult situations, Maher assured his manager that he was willing to move ahead with any course of action his boss chose. However, he wanted to make his boss aware

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of what he felt was a better alternative, or additional issues that needed to be considered.

No doubt there are risks. I talk with people every day who keep quiet because they worry about being fired; but this is a fear that is more highly exaggerated than real. Remember that you are the one closest to the marketplace, and can offer a perspective on the situation that no one else can. Don't short-change what you know by keeping your mouth shut – but don't expect to win all the time either.

Reduce any risk there may be by giving thought to how you explain it. Maher says, "The way the feedback is delivered needs to be thoughtful, and you need to read your manager [to know] about how best to do this."

### **When the boss is away**

Having a boss in another time zone has pluses and minuses. With the latter, there's the obvious time difference and you can sometimes feel out of the loop or abandoned by HQ. But Kristula-Green at Leo Burnett makes the very good point that "when your boss is far away, they don't hang over your shoulder all day, so it's great for people who are self-starters." She runs a region where her direct reports are based in India, Australia and Japan. This situation is the norm now.

Find out how much your boss wants to know – how often and in what way. Does he or she want e-mail updates, regular conference calls or face-to-face meetings like many Japanese bosses prefer.

Bosses are no different than any of us. Some like to read, some like to talk, some prefer to listen. Know or find out about your boss's preferences and provide the information that way. Don't expect that your boss has the same preferences as you do, or that he or she will adjust to your style.

I hear people complain that e-mails they send to their boss get ignored. Yet, they keep on sending them. If e-mails aren't working, find out if calls would be better – and how often. If your boss is not a reader, you'll get nowhere sending those big fat e-mail files that clog up the e-mail account.

### **When your boss changes**

When you have a new boss or new reporting relationships, you need to start all over again – go back and go over responsibilities and expectations, and work on developing a new relationship. That said, all of the work you've done so far has not been wasted – you learned how to communicate with the prior boss and so you can do it again.

Recognize that the new boss may very well have new priorities. But don't mourn too long either for the former boss. Act like those who get successfully married for the second time: Start fresh, don't talk about your ex and figure out how to make this relationship better than the last one.

### **It's easier to change yourself**

You can influence your boss, but it's much easier to change your reactions to him than to change him. Let's say you want to have your boss spend more time understanding the challenges of the Japanese market by visiting more often. You can extol the potential of Japan and ask for more time on his screen, as well as more money; but eventually it's you who has to change and recognize that his priorities may remain elsewhere.

If the relationship with your boss is not a good one, recognize the role that you may have consciously, or subconsciously, played in making it that way. Have you given your power away, have you failed to assert yourself or pushed too hard, have you spent more time complaining about your boss to your spouse than thinking about what you could do to make things better?

Don't spend too much time flagellating yourself, or your boss, over the past. It's never too late to get the relationship headed in a more positive direction. Everyone will benefit – you, your boss and your company.

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