

The Skill of Managing-up



Overview

Managing your relationship with your boss is at the heart of the skill of managing-up. It's also directly related to being politically savvy. Of course, some people hear the term managing-up and cringe. They believe it's rooted in manipulation or is a tactic used to undermine the boss. So what exactly does "managing-up" mean? To put it simply, it's effectively managing your relationship with your boss. It's not a manipulative ploy; it's creating a relationship that serves both you and your supervisor well. In order to develop a more effective relationship with your supervisor, consider using the following five strategies.

1. Learn your boss's style
2. Take an active role in problem solving
3. Understand what your boss needs from you
4. Discuss what's expected of you
5. Focus on managing yourself

Why it matters:

Managing-up is about developing a stronger, more engaged relationship with your supervisor. It's rare that people achieve great things solely by themselves. In order to be truly effective, we need the support and help of others. When you practice the skill of managing-up you create a relationship that will position you for success and also increase your influence with those above you. Being politically savvy means developing and maintaining good relationships with people at all levels within the organization.

Learn your boss's style

Take the time to learn the style of your boss. People are different and these notable differences can be a source of tension in the workplace. We have differences in how we communicate, how we make decisions, how we learn, and how we approach our work. When we understand our manager's style, we can adjust our own.

Learn how your supervisor prefers to communicate. Does he or she like face-to-face communication or prefer to rely on email? How does your boss process information? Does he or she prefer to “talk things through” or prefer to have some time to process the information before making a decision. If your manager likes to talk things through, present the information in a meeting and come prepared to discuss the decision. If your boss needs time to reflect before making a decision, consider that when making a request of him or her. Provide the information needed via email. This is a way for your boss to internally process the request before giving you a response.

Sometimes there are aspects of our manager's style that are particularly challenging. Many can relate to the stress and irritation caused by a micro-managing boss. With micro-managing, it's typically about control—the manager wants to have control over all aspects of the work. Here lies an opportunity to adjust your style. Keep your boss informed; communicate your progress on work assignments and projects. Send him or her emails with information about where you are with a project and set up check-ins to review your status. Though this might seem like information overload or more work to you, it's a way to potentially calm your micro-manager's fears and reassure him or her that you are able to handle the work without your boss being involved in every step. A little extra effort on your part may reduce this type of behavior in the future.

Understanding your boss's style helps you to know how to flex or adjust your own style. This does not mean you lose who you are—but it's a way to develop a stronger relationship. The goal is to create a compatible relationship with your supervisor.

Become a solution provider

Become a problem solver not a problem producer for your boss. Rather than just passing a problem onto your manager, determine possible solutions before you raise the issue. Ask yourself, “If it were up to me, what would I do?” When presenting the problem to your supervisor, say, “This is the problem I've encountered and here is what I was thinking about doing to resolve it. Any advice or suggestions?” If you are constantly passing off problems to your boss, he or she

may doubt your confidence and ability to perform your job well. When you deliver a solution or recommendation to the problem, you show your initiative. At some point there may be a problem that only your manager can solve or a decision that only he or she can make, however you may want to try to reduce these occurrences and save them up for when it's really important. It's wise to regard your boss's time as a limited resource.

What your manager needs from you

Your supervisor needs to hear from you about how things are going. Be up-front about good and bad news. Provide periodic updates to your boss about your accomplishments. Spotlight the good performers on your team and talk about their accomplishments. Also explain what you're trying to achieve with employees who need improvement—and ask for your supervisor's support. You want your boss to understand what you have going on—good or bad. The responsibility to provide this information falls on your shoulders. People aren't mind-readers, so we cannot assume our boss knows everything that's happening, even if he or she is in the same office as we are.

Your boss also needs to know what you need from him or her. If you need help with a project, ask. If you are dealing with a challenging customer or employee and need support, ask for it. We all have times when we get so focused on our work that we fail to notice what's going on around us—this happens to supervisors too.

Talk about expectations

Communicate around workplace expectations. Although they should, not all supervisors are going to tell you what they expect of you. Therefore, you must take the responsibility to seek out this information. Ask your manager directly: "If in one year from now I have exceeded your expectations, what will I have accomplished?" This question really is asking your manager to describe what success would look like. Ask for specific details if your manager is too vague; don't settle for a muggy description of expectations. Not understanding what your boss expects from you interferes with your success.

If the expectations are unrealistic, speak up. The key to doing this well is to balance courage and consideration. Have the courage to tell your boss the expectations are unrealistic either due to the timeframe, scope of the project or other requirements

and constraints. And, have the consideration to be mindful of how you address this. Timing is important. Your body language and tone of voice are important as well. If your supervisor shares with you what you consider to be an unrealistic expectation and this causes you to become irritated, give yourself some time to cool down before you address it with him or her. Your irritation will come through in how you speak to your manager and may have the potential to escalate the situation. In turn, it may prevent your boss from feeling comfortable discussing his or her expectations in the future. We constantly need feedback on how we're doing and what is expected of us. If there is a lack of clarity around the expectations, you will not perform your job well, and the person that will suffer the most will be you.

Focus on yourself, first

In addition to gaining a greater understanding about your supervisor, do some self-reflection to understand more about yourself. Are there things about you that you need to change? Are there aspects of your behavior that need to be altered? It is easy to identify what needs to change in others, but we do not always carefully examine our own attitudes and behaviors.

As a first step, focus on doing your job well. Go above and beyond what's expected—meet your deadlines, follow-through on your commitments, be a problem-solver (not a problem creator). Next, be aware of how you interact with your colleagues. Would they consider you to be supportive of them? Are you a team player? Can they rely on you? Are you able to give and receive constructive criticism? Do they trust you? If you answered no to any of these questions, then you have some work to do. Then, consider your own supervisory role. Do you already encompass the qualities you expect from your boss? Are you role modeling the type of behavior you want to see from him or her? Are your expectations of others clear? Do you meet regularly with your employees? Do you give timely and helpful feedback? If you answered no to any of these questions, then you have some opportunities to improve. Lastly, as stated above, study the strengths and weaknesses of your boss and learn to appreciate them. Once you've spent time observing and understanding your boss, consider how to adapt your own style to better complement those strengths and minimize the weaknesses. Also reflect on how your own style works with or against your supervisor's style. The only behaviors you can control are your own. You won't change your boss, but you can adapt and can change yourself.

In Summary

In their article, *Managing your Boss*, Harvard Business professors John Gabarro and John Kotter explain that managing-up is about “pursuing a healthy and productive working relationship based on mutual respect and understanding.” Learn your boss’s style, including communication preferences and learning/work style. Take an active role in problem solving—provide solutions and recommendations and avoid passing problems onto your manager. Understand what your boss needs from you, be assertive, and share both good and bad news. Remember your boss is not a mind-reader. You are not a mind-reader either, so discuss with your boss what’s expected of you. And last, but certainly not least, focus on self-management. By managing up, you nurture a key relationship that will lead to greater effectiveness for you, your supervisor, and the organization.

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