

1 What is “managing up”?

Managing up is about trying to build an effective relationship with your superiors—with those people who have more power than you—and about how to build such relationships so that you can do what’s best for the organization.

2 Why is managing up a useful tool in a person’s career?

Leadership really involves three imperatives: managing yourself, managing your team, and managing your network. Most people, when they think of leadership, only think about managing their team and don’t think about managing themselves or their network. Managing your network is about managing relationships with people over whom you have no formal authority, and those people can be inside or outside the organization and above or below you.

If you want to be effective as a leader, you have to influence the people who report to you and also the people who don’t—the peers you are deeply dependent on to get your job done—and your bosses. If you don’t manage the relationships within that network, then you and your team will not be aligned with what the organization really needs. So you’re not going to know how to prioritize what your team should be working on. You also won’t have the resources your team members need to get their jobs done.

3 What benefits are there to managing up?

When you’re managing up, what you’re really trying to do is build partnerships with your bosses. When you build a partnership, you’re trying to build a sense of mutual trust with that specific individual.

And obviously, some bosses you can’t trust or shouldn’t trust. But in general, you want to think about how to build a partnership so that you can do what’s best for the enterprise. Don’t forget to remind yourself, of course, that bosses are human too and that they are imperfect like the rest of us. That will help you be more empathetic, to understand that as part of managing up you need to step into the shoes of your boss and see the world from his or her point of view. What are the priorities of the boss? What are the pressures that the boss is feeling? What’s the preferred style of communication?

Questions

WISDOM AND GUIDANCE FOR
SUCCESSFUL CAREER BUILDING

*An interview with Linda A. Hill, Ph.D.,
on “managing up”*

• • • By CATHERINE A. CARDNO, PH.D.

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Not that you always have to adapt to the boss; sometimes the boss may need to adapt to you. But to the extent that you can help your boss be helpful to you, your team will be more effective and you'll be more effective. And you do want those conversations to be two way. The boss can help you understand the organization's priorities, and you have information that helps the boss set those priorities properly.

4 What are the downsides?

I think the most common is that if people see you as only managing up and not managing your peers or team very well, you can be seen in a negative light, as being very political, only doing what the boss wants and not looking out for what's best for the organization. If you are just seen as playing to the boss, that will reduce your credibility. Your colleagues will be less likely to trust your intent and your motives.

The other is that people who are perceived as the boss's favorites are considered as having an unfair advantage, and no one ever likes that sort of circumstance. Colleagues won't necessarily give you the feedback you need to be more effective because they're too afraid to upset you, because you may ruin their relationship with that particular boss.

5 What are the first steps that someone should take to manage up?

There are two things to start with after beginning with the premise that your boss is only human like the rest of us. First is to remind yourself that your boss does depend on you and to determine what he or she depends on you for. Second, you've got to be realistic about what's going on in the relationship. You have a responsibility to make sure the relationship works well. So if your boss's expectations aren't clear to you, then you need to be proactive and ask for clarification. You can't just say the boss didn't do it, or didn't tell me, and complain. You actively need to take responsibility and talk to your boss about the things

that you need to know to be able to be successful.

6 What are the most common missteps and how does one avoid them?

If you have two bosses, you need to pay attention to both. Sometimes people pick the boss they are going to manage up, and either it's the one who's easiest because of proximity or style or because he or she is more powerful or for some other reason. But picking just one can backfire.

Another misstep is that your colleagues can perceive you as never saying no to the boss. Perhaps you always tell the boss yes, and the rest of your team just has to suffer the consequences of your never pushing back. Managing your boss is not just doing what the boss says; it's having a two-way conversation and trying to shape that conversation and being clear when demands or deadlines are unreasonable considering the available resources.

Another common mistake is failing to properly manage the risks associated with your tasks. People who want to make sure they do very well will do what the boss wants. Then they sometimes take on risks they don't need. They should talk to the boss about risk to make sure the boss is comfortable with that risk profile.

Lastly, particularly when people get promoted, they often don't see the boss as someone who can help them. They may be a little bit worried that others might see the promotion as a mistake, so they avoid asking the boss for assistance. Now, bosses don't always behave well, and you shouldn't always go to the boss. Sometimes you should go to somebody else in your network.

But often we're too reticent to make ourselves a little bit more vulnerable in our interactions with the boss and in explaining that there are parts of the job we get, parts we know how to learn, but other pieces on which we could use some coaching and assistance.



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7 Are these strategies translatable to other aspects of the workplace?

A lot of what I'm saying is also relevant with peers. The way we build effective work relationships is really by mutual trust, mutual expectations, and mutual influence to some extent. And mutual is important here, but there are two dimensions of trust.

People assess your character and your competence. You need to pay attention to both because what matters is the perception, not just the reality. **CE**

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