

# Managing Upward – Influencing and Developing Your Boss

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You can't go wrong by focusing on the person and the relationship. Ask questions to show interest and help you understand your manager and his needs. Find ways to show you appreciate his work and the relationship. Be clear about your own needs and boundaries and let him know gently but firmly if he oversteps the line. Be positive and optimistic about him and the company. Remember that for better or worse, the relationship will be a powerful influence on both of you, and do your best to make it constructive.

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The normally upbeat, straight-backed man sat looking at Alicia with a slight slump and some considerable sorrow in his eyes. On the desk in front of him was his resignation letter.

"I have to resign. The relationship between me and the CEO has become unbearable. I can't get through to him, he won't listen and he's surrounded by cronies who just repeat what he says."

At 43, Kennard was the US-educated head of the sportswear division of one of Asia's largest clothing manufacturers and had been a rising star in the company, tipped to be the CEO himself one day.

As a consultant to the company and Kennard's Executive Coach, Alicia persuaded him to file the

letter for a while and work with her on some techniques for influencing Kennard's boss.

Kennard is by no means alone in feeling that he can't get through to his superior. In our work with major companies over the last 20 years, we have found that this lack of good upward communication is one of the greatest and most unrecognized blocks to good corporate performance.

Perhaps, the greatest mistake people make when trying to influence or manage upward is based on the mistaken—and often unconscious—assumption that your relationship with someone you report to is intrinsically different from any other. It's not. To the brain, all relationships are the same, both inside and outside the workplace. This is true with your boss, your client or customer,

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your life partner and even your dog (who has a not-too dissimilar brain to a human).

Yes, your boss or bosses may have to make different decisions than you, and yes they may have more power within the organization, at least overtly. But in our experience (backed by research<sup>1</sup>), you can develop authentic, personal power that enables you to achieve the outcomes you want roughly 85% of the time. You can not only manage upward, but coach, helping your boss develop and grow.

The secret is in understanding not just that in essence relationships at work and outside are the same, but that to human beings relationships are paramount. About 80% of our entire nervous system and biology is geared toward forming supportive relationships. This is true of CEOs as well as men and women on the shop-floor. Our hopes, fears and fulfillment revolve around how we get along with others. People who are able to draw others at all levels to themselves and their ideas are, consciously or unconsciously, masters at not just Emotional Intelligence (EQ) but, more importantly (to use another term from the originator of that concept, Daniel Goleman), Social Intelligence (SQ).<sup>2</sup>

These masters at relationships have a positive effect on everyone around them, upwards and downwards. They make people feel valued, secure, optimistic, and make a reality of that much-hackneyed word, inspired. They make people committed to the real or potential relationship with them, and willing to do what it takes to keep and strengthen that bond. Even if their ideas are not brilliant, their impact is enormous (think some well-known political leaders and CEOs).

We will never forget a training we conducted a few years ago for the top leaders of one

multinational firm. The topic was the how-to of giving annual assessment dialogs that led to engagement and development of their people.

After introducing basic assessment dialog skills, we asked the executives to practice in role plays, one person being the leader giving the assessment and the other receiving it. The idea was that the 'leader' was to use relationship skills to guide the conversation in such a way that their 'report' accepted even negative feedback and committed to change, while at the same time strengthening the commitment and the relationship. Most of the role plays started off fairly clumsily, with little reference to strengths and a delivery of feedback that sounded like criticism. Since the brain becomes defensive when a person is criticized this led to less than stellar results.

To our surprise, the best role play was done by a young man who had just been promoted into the leadership circle and who played the role of the report. He skillfully guided the conversation so that his 'boss', who was in fact one of the top executives but who had not done well in previous exercises, did brilliantly. Using questions and praise, he got his boss to clarify his expectations in ways the man had obviously never done for real and guided his boss on how to get the best from him. He elicited not only negative feedback in specific and forward looking ways but got his boss to focus on his strengths and help him build on those. In that brief exchange, the 'report' taught his 'boss' how to be a good manager, and in particular how to form a positive and transforming relationship with him.

What we had witnessed was a superb example of coaching upward. The skills used in this exchange are simple:

<sup>1</sup> Yakl G, *et al.*, "Patterns of Influence Behavior for Managers", *Group Organization Management*, 18:5:93. See also Corvey S "Speed of Trust", Free Press, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Goleman D, "Social Intelligence", Bantam, 2007.

Adroit use of praise;  
Emphasizing commonality;  
The exchange of needs; and  
The skilful use of questions.

### **Good Listening**

A year later that young man was promoted to head his division, then a few years later to number two in the firm. And we don't expect he'll stop there.

There are six simple rules to bear in mind whenever you are having a difficult conversation. They incorporate all of the skills that the future managing partner used. There are three don'ts and three do's.

#### **Don'ts**

1. Don't assume. This includes assuming you know what your manager wants or that she is like you or any other boss you've had.
2. Don't acquiesce. Don't withhold concerns or relationship issues or realistic limitations.
3. Don't focus on the negative.

#### **Dos**

1. Focus on building a trusting, mutually respectful relationship.
2. Show genuine interest in the other person.
3. Be clear on what outcome you want from the conversation.

### **The Three Don'ts**

#### **Don't Assume**

Only when you put aside your assumptions about other people can you begin to influence and engage them. Research has shown that up to 90% of our assumptions about anyone are wrong.<sup>3</sup> And when the person is our boss, or someone who has authority over us, we are even

more likely to react on the basis of past history rather than present observation.

One reason for our misconceptions around bosses is that many people don't trust their superiors—about 70% in fact.<sup>4</sup> Their assumptions about how the manager will react are largely based on this distrust rather than reality. Even where there is trust, assumptions can be based on past relationships—often former bosses, teachers, parents or other authority figures. You may not be reacting to the person in the room, with all their complexity and uniqueness. You are standing in front of a displeased teacher or an angry supervisor from your past. Your nervous system may gear up for fight, flight or freeze. Your behavior—whether to back away, avoid the issue or be confrontational, may not be optimal in the conversation you are having now.

How do you get around this? The first rule is to remind yourself that any assumptions you make about your boss are very probably wrong. Prepare for the meeting by asking yourself what your assumptions are. This awareness will prevent you from falling into the trap of relying on them in an unconscious way. Now you can be actively curious and open to take in clues about your current boss, his concerns, hopes and needs.

This will allow your brain to function at its best, to be guided by the amazing unconscious mechanisms which track others' moods and pick up clues invisible to the conscious mind and eye, and guide your reactions and your decisions.

#### **Don't Acquiesce**

Saying yes when you mean no, and setting or accepting unrealistic expectations, are common traps employees fall into. We call these kinds of behaviors the 'mouse trap', because it implies

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<sup>3</sup> Chabris C and Simons D, "The Invisible Gorilla", Broadway, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Hurley R, "The Decision to Trust", *Harvard Business Review*, September 2006.

timidity and fear. However, this fearful behavior tends to have the opposite effect than intended. A good boss wants someone he can trust to give an honest opinion—even when it goes against his own and is frustrating at the time—and who can be counted on to deliver what is promised.

We worked in one US firm where a feisty, experienced VP guided the CEO by frequently challenging his ideas, which were often at first fueled by impatience and grandiosity. During her tenure, there was good communication from the C Suite, even very direct and tough decisions were perceived to be in line with the company values and strategy and the CEO was rated very highly in engagement surveys.

The VP was a tiny woman with a rural Georgia accent who seemed unprepossessing at first glance but who stood up to her boss's flare-ups. She was able to influence him because she was totally honest and loyal and had won his trust. When she held up a mirror through her feedback, he grudgingly recognized that his first impulses were not his best.

When the VP left the company her replacement was a smoother, more indirect 'yes man', who flattered his boss, agreed with all his ideas and limited access to the CEO by those with differing opinions.

Within eight months, the CEO's actions had lost him the confidence of first his senior executives and then, in the face of harsh financial times for the industry, the Board. He was forced to resign. And his acquiescing report also lost his position.

### **Don't Focus on the Negative**

Even when you have bad news to report, begin on a positive note, perhaps about the relationship

or about some aspect of the company that both you and your boss can be proud of. This opens the brain up to hear what you have to say. Beginning on a negative closes down the mind through what Daniel Goleman calls an 'amygdala hijack.'<sup>5</sup> If you can sound optimistic, so much the better.

People, including bosses, are attracted to positive, optimistic individuals.<sup>6</sup> Smiling, humor when appropriate, and of course coming up with ideas on how to overcome the challenges to draw your superior's attention are all helpful. It's not just the boss who is tasked with setting an uplifting tone for the company, it's also the people around him.

Keeping your focus on the positive also involves the skillful use of praise. Most people don't use praise well and, in our experience, many don't use praise at all. That's a pity because study after study has shown that praise is an influencer's, and manager's strongest tool.<sup>7</sup>

Praise releases the vital neurochemical dopamine, which is part of the brain's reward mechanism. Sometimes referred to as the 'happiness chemical' for its ability to lift mood, dopamine is an opiate. If scientists ever come up with a pill or injection that delivered dopamine directly to the brain, it would probably be illegal. In a sense, when you dispense dopamine through praise you become your bosses' drug dealer! And no one fires their pusher.

But dopamine doesn't just deliver a chemical high. It also enables the brain to work faster, better and more innovatively. If you want your boss to make better decisions—use praise.

However, delivering really effective praise is a skill. Too many people use what we call 'lazy praise', which is usually general and meaningless ('good job') or just about obvious achievements

<sup>5</sup> Goleman D, "Emotional Intelligence", Bantam.

<sup>6</sup> Sharot T, "The Optimism Bias", *Time Magazine*, May 26, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Robinsion J, "In Praise of Praising Your Employees", *Gallup Management Journal*, November 9, 2006.

“congratulations on winning that new account”). Of course you shouldn’t avoid large accomplishments. However, look for the less obvious ways to praise, such as not just what she does but how she does it. Is she trying new approaches to business issues or leadership? Is she taking more time with her staff? Did you like a particular slant she took in a recent presentation?

As with people who report to you, praising specific behaviors, particularly those that show extra effort or trying something new, will reward and reinforce them. The person you praise in this way will continue not only to do the specific new things you are praising him for but perhaps will continue to try new things, safe in the assurance that you will recognize and support his efforts rather than criticize him for failure.

Remember, your boss needs to feel valued and recognized as much as you do. Most top leaders we work with are in fact hindered by their subordinates’ fear of seeming to be currying favor. For this reason, leaders are usually far less often praised than those of lower rank.

When you communicate in ways that reinforce and build on what your boss does well, you are in fact developing him. You are not only managing upward, you are coaching upward.

## **The Dos**

### **Focus on Building a Trusting, Mutually Respectful Relationship**

Sure you need to have the skills for your role and be able to deliver what your boss and the company require. But managing upward is just like managing downward, all about creating a bond that enables both people to feel confident, valued and part of a mutually supportive tribe with common values and goals.

In any conversation, for example, only a small portion of the brain—about 5%—is focused on the topic the conversation seems to be about. Say, for example, next years’ financial estimate or whether to create a new product line. Although consciously your boss may seem to be paying attention to the information you give (or not!), that’s only a tiny sliver of what’s really going on in his head.

About 20% of the brain is focused on underlying issues and how the topic might affect what the person really cares about. These brain ‘hot spots’ can be listed under the acronym SCARF—status (how I perceive other people value me), certainty (how will this affect my ability to know what’s going to happen?) autonomy (what does this mean for my control over my work life and decisions that affect me?) relatedness (how will this affect the nexus of my relationships) and fairness (not just to me but to those around me).

The rest of the brain, a whopping 75%, is focusing on the relationship between, in this case, you and your boss. It is asking, “Are you part of my tribe?” (What do we have in common?) “Can I trust you?” and “Can you meet my needs?”

The power of relationship is being highlighted by new research almost weekly. For example, your very genes operate differently depending on the person you’re with. If you are with someone who is negative, critical and/or reminds you of someone who was negative towards you, certain genes will become ‘switched on’ to deal with that situation. If you are with people with whom you feel comfortable and supported, other genes turn on and enable you to be far more effective in any role.<sup>8</sup> Good relationships are the great persuaders.

Of course, a fundamental part of the art of relationship forming is building trust. One of the most basic facts about human beings is that we are hard wired to trust those who we perceive

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<sup>8</sup> Goleman, “Social Intelligence”, Bantam, 2007.

to be members of our tribe. What this means in practice is that we invest more trust in those with whom we have most in common.<sup>9</sup>

In any conversation, we increase trust by emphasizing what we have in common with the other person, and what we agree on. These can be ‘trivial’—we both support the same sports team, shop in the same stores, like the same kind of weather—or they can be ‘important’—our values, our core beliefs or our politics. The brain does not distinguish between the trivial and the important, it simply looks for commonality.

Each commonality gives the brain a shot of dopamine and also another very important neurochemical: oxytocin. Oxytocin is the chemical which promotes bonding between individuals and is also associated with trust.<sup>10</sup> The more of these two neurochemicals you can trigger in the other person’s brain, the more you will be trusted and the more the other person will be invested in the relationship with you. And that includes your boss.

### **Show Genuine Interest in the Other Person**

One of the chief skills that a good influencer has is in demonstrating genuine interest in the other person. In our observation, most people are only too ready to talk about themselves, their ideas, and their opinions. What this means in practice is that an expert in upward management must be ready to ask questions which draw out the other person and make him feel that he is valued and respected.

You show interest in demonstrating keen listening skills—repeating back what the other person has said by using phrases such as “what I hear you say is....”, “it seems that what you’re really saying is....”. Hearing his ideas fed back to

him can even be a bit challenging and can force your superior to rethink his position.

Very often skilled questioning and listening can lead your superior to not only value you more but also to be more open to your ideas and opinions.

### **Be Clear on What Outcome You Want from the Conversation**

One of the most extraordinary things that we’ve noticed over the years is that so many times people go into an important or difficult conversation with only a very vague idea of what they want out of it. Nothing turns off a time-poor manager or executive more than a conversation that seems to be going nowhere.

What we advise people to do is work out a pre-meeting check list. This will include such things as the assumptions you have, the kind of dialog pitfalls you are prone to fall into (for example, talking too much rather than listening), and the bottom line of what you want from the conversation. Be clear and, above all, specific. Often people seem to agree on generalities and then, later, find that they both assumed something different about what those generalities mean.

Knowing what outcome you want also means being aware of your needs, as of the other person. You should have a clear idea of what you want them to do or not to do—what action you want them to take or refrain from as a result of the conversation. Remember that an action is not a thought or a feeling. You cannot expect the other person to think or feel something on demand. Asking them to understand, take on board or appreciate is therefore a waste of time. Instead, ask them to take actions that demonstrate that they understand, appreciate, etc.

<sup>9</sup> Tomlin D, *et al.*, “Getting to Know You: Reputation and Trust”, *Science* 308:5718:2005.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

And your needs must be specific. There's a vast difference, for example, between saying "I need you to let me know your thoughts on this as soon as possible" and "I need you to let me know your thoughts on this by noon on Thursday so I can respond to the client by Friday morning." Managing upward therefore involves having a very clear idea of your specific, actionable needs.

Knowing your needs also means having a clear idea of your boundaries and what you can afford to be flexible on and what you can't. People feel more secure and trusting if they are with someone who is clear about their needs and boundaries, and that includes your superior.

### **Dealing with Really Difficult Bosses**

Remember at the start of the article we said that we could give you techniques that would work about 85% of the time? Well, what about the other 15%? What if you have a boss who would hold your well-meant honesty against you, no matter how adroitly it was expressed? Or what if she refused to meet those needs of yours that she'd agreed to, and instead, for example, yelled at you when she said she wouldn't or went on looking at the computer while you spoke when she had agreed not to?

Some people are just nasty. Others may suffer from various psychiatric disorders that make having a genuine conversation with them difficult. A very small percentage of the population (about 2%) do not feel empathy and even enjoy inflicting pain and dividing people. They are variously called either psychopaths or sociopaths.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, these people can be charming, often have a shallow but seemingly impressive understanding of a wide range of topics and are great manipulators. They cause lasting damage to anyone in their sphere

of influence. Our advice would be to get as far away from them as you can: what you might lose in income will probably be less than the medical bills you have from the experience even years later.

Other difficult bosses may be hard to change but not malicious. These include people who seem to focus only on themselves, people who don't pick up social cues and seem oblivious to what others feel, and people who are obsessive about the detail and can't see the larger picture. If you decide to stay with these difficult bosses, your best bet is to be very clear about your boundaries and build supportive relationships with colleagues.

Finally, there are the bosses who may be suffering from mood disorders. Estimates of the incidence of depression within organizations range from 15% to 30%. However, everyone agrees that the rates of depression and its counterpart anxiety are rising. Some researchers have estimated that the overall rate of depression is doubling every 10 years.<sup>12</sup>

Anxiety and depression are both cyclical and can come and go for reasons that are invisible to you and perhaps to the sufferer. In its milder forms, people suffering from depression may just seem more emotionally inconsistent, less able to enjoy themselves, more worried about mistakes or what others think of them.

People with these mood disorders can be irritable or absent in body or seemingly in mind. When the illness is strong they may not be able to make and stand by decisions.

Sufferers may experience a wide range of chronic illness like back pain, cancer or even some forms of diabetes<sup>13</sup> which are related to the disorder. Sufferers may go through phases of avoiding people by hiding behind the closed door

<sup>11</sup> Spence, D Address, "What Makes a Psychopath" at the "Psychopathy and the problem of Evil" conference, September 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Marcus S, *et al.*, "National Trends in the Treatment for Depression from 1998 to 2007", *Arch Gen Psychiatry*, 67:12:2010.

<sup>13</sup> Katon W, *et al.*, "Depression and Diabetes", Wiley, 2010.

and computer. They may become demanding and inappropriate; in some cases, we know making emotional telephone calls to staff after hours or on weekends.

It's important not to back away from the person with depression or anxiety, even if it's your boss. If you can, don't let irritation build up and then blow your stack. Instead, tell the person what you are experiencing from her behavior, how it affects you and what you would like her to do differently. If she is aware of and open to discussing the mood disorder, ask questions to help you understand what she feels and what things most upset or stress her. Ask what she would need of you to support her. And be clear and direct about what you need of her, both in terms of the relationship and her role as your manager.

### **Summary**

After a few coaching sessions Kennard was able to use the techniques we have outlined to make a much better relationship with his CEO and they now make a really great team to the great benefit of the company as a whole.

Like Kennard you can't go wrong by focusing on the person and the relationship. Ask questions to show interest and help you understand your manager and his needs. Find ways to show you appreciate his work and the relationship. Be clear on your own needs and boundaries and let him know gently but firmly if he oversteps the line. Be positive and optimistic about him and the company. Remember that for better or worse, the relationship will be a powerful influence on both of you and do your best to make it constructive. ☺

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