



# Managing 'Up': Achieving an Effective Partnership with Your Boss

BY JANET BICKEL, MA

*"Wherever there is a man who exercises authority, there is a man who resists authority."*

—Oscar Wilde

*"There is always a choice about the way you do your work, even if there is not a choice about the work itself."*

—Stephen Lundin

**I**s your boss a great manager who recognizes that each person is different, who defines outcomes sought and supports each person in developing their individual talents? If so, then are you taking advantage of this rarity? Are you interacting with your boss in ways that produce the best possible results?

This conditional transitory relationship of mutual dependence often involves features and emotional components that stymie even the smartest professional. This article opens with suggestions about understanding your boss's preferences and pressures so that you more effectively tailor your approach to and your communications with him or her. Next, I offer insights into common maladaptive patterns, and finally I propose recommendations on making the most of the relationship. These recommendations assume that your boss is not "impossible"—e.g., a maneuverer, narcissist, bully, "Darth Vader," or "Mr. Burns" (a future column will address these all-too-common scenarios).

## Boss Analysis

Making the most of the relationship with your boss begins with seeking to understand him or her. Let's begin with a destination check: Are your goals aligned with those of your boss? If not, can you build more support for shared goals? Bosses are much more likely to work toward your interests if your interests also serve theirs.

The first step in boss analysis is turning off your "I like—I don't like" and "I agree—I don't agree" switch. Also, stop wishing for warmth, empathy, or friendship. Recognize

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that if you need to admire your boss, that need interferes with your ability to objectively read the cues. Just as you read books, study your boss (and other key people). Few will tell you their agenda directly, so you must probe beneath the surface. For instance, without being confrontational, inquire about the thinking behind important decisions. Pay attention to what is not said, as well as to what is said. Be alert to silences and abrupt changes in subject. Notice also any nonverbal cues, as people are often inconsistent, especially when seeking to bypass embarrassment or threat. Typically less controlled than the spoken word, body language can reveal discomfort or evasion—for example, breaking eye contact or fidgeting when you ask about that space he or she promised.

image, or by what will achieve the fastest results?

## Fit the Boss's Style

Tailor communications to fit the channels of your boss's mind and learning style and information preferences. For instance, how much and what type of information does the boss prefer—three bullet points, a one-page summary, or five pages with footnotes? In advance, or on arrival followed by a follow-up memo? Ask about preferences directly or learn from your own and others' experiences. Then, adapt your message and style.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator can be helpful in interpreting preferences. For instance, with extroverts, who disclose freely and speak in draft, you may need to ask for a distillation to make sure you understand the action item. With introverts, who reveal less and who are more comfortable with silence, resist the temptation to talk too much and use questions to draw them out.

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Now, what is your boss's "big picture"—i.e., what are the pressures and critical success factors? Chairs' and deans' jobs are almost overwhelming in their demands, reflecting all the ill-logic, perturbations, and conflicts in the larger system. In many systems these individuals are tap dancing for multiple masters, and often your boss is responding to the pressure *du jour*. So keep in focus your boss's current primary units of measurement—e.g. keeping his or her job, NIH grants, dollars, time, status, being liked. Also, is this person most likely to be influenced by appeal to what others think, by what is in line with his or her own self-

If your boss primarily uses his or her senses to take in information, then offer details and documented applications—build from small pieces to the big picture. If your boss primarily uses his or her imagination to take in information, then start with the big picture, emphasizing opportunities, challenges and benefits.

If your boss mainly uses logic to come to conclusions, then present analyses of quantitative data, well-organized evidence and stress competent handling; avoid such verbs as "wish," "feel," "hope." If he or she primarily uses feelings and values to come to conclusions, then you can allow your heart

to show through and emphasize benefits to people, mention who else favors the idea, and use stories and examples.

A particular challenge to decisive individuals are bosses who need large quantities of time and data before they're ready to make decisions. Try to respect their need to immerse themselves deeply before reaching conclusions and appreciate that for them a decision means a loss of other options. Offering analyses of pros and cons of each option or boiling down options into categories may help—for example, get them to choose among good, fast, or cheap.

### Look at Yourself

Try to look at yourself from your boss's point of view in terms of what impedes or facilitates the relationship: Do you keep the boss updated and informed? How do you handle disagreements? How do you show respect? Bring solutions to problems?

How a person relates to authority figures in general often affects how easily the person manages this relationship. Because science and medicine tend to select for and encourage independence, resentment of authority is common. Preferring autonomy, academics tend to minimize contact and even avoid the boss. These orientations naturally decrease the chances to build a partnership.

At the other extreme are overdependence, often linked with overestimating the boss's abilities and loyalty, and overcompliance—such as swallowing anger when a more assertive response is called for, or permitting exploitation. Women especially fall into these traps. Rather than overdepending on the boss for career development, all professionals should work at building a broad and deep professional network, including a variety of allies.

### Handling Disagreements

Dependence on a boss is bound to be occasionally, if not frequently, frustrating. But blaming your boss for his or her limitations is completely unproductive. Do you escalate normal frustrations with resentments or avoidance? If so, sensing latent hostility, your boss may lose trust in your judgment and behave even less openly.

Disagreements will arise, and no matter how thin the batter, there are always two sides to a pancake. When there is conflict or



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tension, pinpoint the source. For instance, is the tension a result of different measures of performance? Different values? Different stakeholders? Lack of respect for you? Your failure to produce? Your failure to negotiate something up front? Now, address whatever aspects you can. Seek the advice of trustworthy colleagues with greater political savvy or organizational knowledge. Then try to let go of what you can't do anything about. Sometimes you will need to agree to disagree.

Even great ideas don't sell themselves, so be ready to articulate the value-added aspects of what you propose, using “we” rather than “I” language (e.g., “our departmental mission”). And build your skills of persuasion, positioning your ideas and goals to your best advantage. How you frame or define a situation can reorganize perceptions, so choose your frame carefully—for instance, you can say “we must address these difficult conflicts” or “let's use this as an opportunity to find common ground.”

### Habits of Highly Effective Boss Managers

- ❖ Address the boss's priorities. To the extent possible, try to align yourself with departmental missions, so that your successes also reflect well on your boss.
- ❖ Even if you have doubts about your

boss, do what you can to build trust. Try to set an inviting undefensive tone, e.g., “I'd appreciate hearing your concerns and ideas” and “understanding your perspective is helpful.” If your boss doesn't have much of what you need or want, a simple request for help may bridge the distance. Most bosses enjoy demonstrating how wise they are, so at least occasionally ask for their counsel and show appreciation.

- ❖ Make excellent use of the boss's time, especially face time, using what you know about his or her communication preferences. Bring good questions so you can use each opportunity to gain clarity about what's important or to address ambiguities.
- ❖ Don't raise problems unless you can suggest alternatives, and preferably the pros and cons of strategies you've considered. Whenever you can, invite dialogue—e.g., “would you change how we're positioning this?”
- ❖ Articulate what you need to achieve the goals you've agreed on in terms of time, support, resources, and why it's in the department's interests to do so. Expect pushback, and be ready to negotiate.
- ❖ Don't internalize or personalize negative politics, since what's happening is a reflection of competition within a complex system and not about you. Personalizing leads to insecure and defensive behaviors. Similarly, refrain from moralistic labels (“she lacks integrity”) and blanket statements (“he treats his secretary like dirt”) in favor of distancing statements (“we don't share the same vision” or “I'd handle that a different way”).

If you've tried all the above without success, it may be time to look for a new boss—or start your own business! ❖

### Sources and Further Reading:

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