

Managing Your Manager

By Katherine Spencer Lee

We'd all like to have the perfect boss: the one who is cheerful, professional, experienced and fair. But managers, like everyone else, aren't perfect. Perhaps your supervisor is a great communicator but a poor delegator, or maybe your department's visionary leader falls short when it comes to attention to detail. Learning what makes your boss tick – not to mention what ticks him or her off – can help you better communicate and improve your odds of developing a great working relationship. Here are some suggestions.

The Boss as Client

You've probably had a variety of bosses in your work life. Some gave you good feedback and always went to bat for you. Others made life difficult; they were too controlling or disorganized. No matter what your manager is like, recognize that you can either work with him or against him. And it's a lot easier to work with him. You probably already go out of your way to accommodate clients or customers. So why not think of your boss as your client? He or she has expectations, and those expectations should define what you deliver. Keep in mind that your relationship with your boss is your most important one at work; it affects your job satisfaction and advancement opportunities.

Begin the relationship on the right foot. Have a meeting with your boss where you discuss such fundamental issues as job responsibilities, performance expectations and objectives, your company and manager's guiding values, and preferred work processes or "best practices."

Have regular meetings. This means not only those weekly progress reports on projects, but also a quarterly or semiannual meeting where you and your manager revisit those "big issues." (You may need to take the initiative and request these meetings.) Business events — from reorganizations to new product launches — can shift priorities. Make sure your priorities are still the same as your manager's.

Try to understand your boss. By observing and asking questions, you can learn a lot about your boss's world. Try to note such things as scope of responsibility, number of direct reports, industry background, and history with the company. Even more telling might be your boss's career goals, relationship with his or her boss and any outside pressures. Placing yourself in his shoes can provide insight into the demands he may also be under and help you gain perspective with regard to your own projects. Perhaps he or she is experiencing stress from his own boss and therefore may seem to have less time for you. In this case, offering your assistance can come as welcome news to your manager and allow you to take on increased responsibility.

Communicate effectively. Figure out the best way to communicate with your manager — some managers prefer face-to-face contact throughout the day and others prefer e-mail or voicemail updates or questions. Also, ask if your supervisor prefers a quick overview with bullet points or a detailed report.

Tell your boss what you need. Once you've found the best way to communicate with your manager, be proactive in telling him or her what resources you need to get your job done (don't hope your boss will guess). Maybe you need additional computer training to create a presentation, for instance. Let your supervisor know why you need it and how it will help you do your job more effectively.

Dealing with Difficult Bosses

The suggestions above will work well with most managers, but there are some who have more specific ways of working that make day-to-day interaction challenging. Here are some typical "difficult boss" personalities and remedies for dealing with them.

Boss type: *The Micro-Manager* (controlling, overly involved)

Remedy: Your boss needs to develop more confidence in you. Begin by asking for complete responsibility on smaller tasks and then work your way up to bigger tasks. Be sure to deliver consistently excellent work or you may lose that trust quickly.

Boss type: *The Non-Manager* (indecisive, hesitant, vague)

Remedy: Instead of asking open-ended questions, give him a few choices and one clear recommendation. Counteract vagueness by asking for clarification. Avoid procrastination on your boss's part by communicating your deadlines and following up on what you need.

Boss type: *The Unreasonable Manager* (crushes you with work)

Remedy: Schedule a meeting to discuss priorities and options for what you can and cannot handle. Suggest bringing in a contractor to help during peak periods.

Use the "managing your manager" strategies presented here to forge a harmonious, productive, and mutually beneficial relationship with your supervisor. You'll realize that it often takes very little effort to adapt to your boss's work style, but the payoff is big. Remember, getting along well with your manager has more bearing than any other factor on your ability to do your best work on the job.

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