Managing Up as a Positive, Collaborative Approach

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My boss never stays on topic in meetings. We never get things done that I need to do!" I've heard variations on this theme for most of my career. I've certainly said it many times, and I'll bet my staff has said it about me. The skill with which you manage such supervisors can make a huge difference in how you feel about getting up in the morning.

As I started to write this column, I assumed I'd speak with many librarians who would discuss creating a productive relationship with their bosses. I reached out to librarians on social media and asked them what they thought about managing their managers, or "managing up." What were their experiences, good or bad? I was surprised to find that (a) many people didn't want to talk about it, (b) those who did talk thought I was asking how to manage my boss and cautioned me that if I got caught I'd get in trouble, and (c) many respondents were overtly hostile to having the responsibility of "managing" their bosses. Even with assurances of anonymity, I struggled to find librarians to interview; several potential discussions fizzled. Most of the folks thought managing up was an onerous task that must be kept secret from one's supervisor and was only necessary in cases where the supervisor was lacking in some fundamental organizational, communication, or supervisory skills. Others thought managing up was analogous to another "up" term: sucking up. Most of these individuals indicated that it was only the supervisor's responsibility to ensure the supervisor and subordinate communicated well and that the subordinate received the necessary support from their manager. Those who thought managing up meant they were solely responsible, both for the relationship and for making the decisions for the supervisor, had bosses they described as reluctant, unwilling to embrace change or make decisions, and a negative drain on the resources around them. Personnel who attempted to improve situations like these developed resentment that they were the "real leaders" (without the pay) and feared for their continued employment if they were discovered to be what they perceived as manipulating.

I have sympathy for these librarians, for it was clear they were in challenging situations. No supervisor should devolve their full responsibilities on their subordinates, even under the guise of collaborative leadership. And no librarian should have to act as a puppet master to ensure their boss

does their job and then watch the credit go to someone who would never have been successful without the behind-the-scenes efforts of others. Worst of all, an insecure leader—one you cannot communicate with or one who you constantly fear—is often fatal to good morale.

However, managing up is a real responsibility. Both Simpson and Rousmaniere write that one's success at work is often a matter of how well you can manage your manager. An employee who does the work well but has a fraught relationship with their supervisor is likely not to see as much credit as an employee who works well with their supervisor. These authors also write that it is important to create a compatible relationship with your supervisor; not, as some feel, to become a favorite but rather to work with your supervisor to create the best possible relationship that leads to a productive environment.

A POSITIVE PERSPECTIVE ON MANAGING UP

Managing up can be a positive experience for some librarians. Emma, a middle manager at a large urban university, stated, "I think the idea of 'managing up' sounds either sneaky or presumptuous, but it turns out it's mostly a way to take responsibility and accountability for your own happiness at work by coming up with ways to improve your relationship with your boss." Anna Elizabeth, patron experience associate at a large public library consortia, thinks managing up is so important it should be taught as part of library science professional development and through mentorship. She hopes library students will learn the skills to build relationships with directors. Anna Elizabeth has observed talented librarians who were unable to move forward or get recognition because they lacked the skills necessary to work with authority figures. Those barriers should not exist, she said. "Managers do their best work when they have relationships with all levels of staff." And while she agreed that a manager is responsible for a positive work environment wherein workers feel valued, "the reality is that managers get busy and sidetracked, and sometimes forget because they have other problems to focus on solving. At that point it is the employee's role to remind their manager that they are there, skilled, and happy to help as needed."

Managing up does not need to be obvious to your boss. As the examples that follow show, it is a communication tactic and relationship skill rather than a way to manipulate or subvert. Even managers who realize that their employees are managing up may be appreciative. Donna, a public services manager at a small university, said, "I have been the grateful recipient of managing up—an employee who lets me know that we need to check-in about a project, or lets me know that they are waiting on me for a decision or next step, or reminds me of something that I need to communicate to the rest of the team."

I agree with Emma, Anna Elizabeth, Donna, Simpson, and Rousmaniere. For the rest of this column, managing up is defined as the act of being an active and supportive participant in your relationship with your supervisor. It is not sycophantic, not a pathway to a teacher's-pet status, and, if done correctly, not subversive. What follows are some basic examples of how you can manage up without getting yourself kicked out.

Communication is Key

What is your boss's preferred communication style? What do they want to know? At what level of detail? How often? I've had supervisors who wanted weekly, monthly, and yearly written reports. Others wanted a formal sit down once a week with all the minutiae of the week included, while others just wanted me to pick up the phone whenever they called. What does your supervisor want? If you don't know, it is up to you to find out and to adhere to their style. You might prefer emails while they might prefer phone calls. Guess what? You'll be making phone calls. However, you don't necessarily need to give up your style. If you like written reports, write them to refer to as needed. I personally create outlined lists for myself for my weekly meetings with my dean; it keeps my abstract brain on task. My boss doesn't generally care about the list; he'd rather hear the information verbally.

While managing up entails some adaptation to your supervisor's workstyle, it is important to communicate what you need. This open communication may be appreciated. Donna said, "I'm usually tracking multiple projects and people, and I can lose sight of a detail or I might prioritize differently than the person working on the project. I would rather an employee let me know what is needed to keep them productive and happy rather than be idle or resentful that they don't have my full attention. Employees have one supervisor and I have many employees. Letting me know what they need from me is important on many levels." Everyone has their own personality, so there will be some interplay between you and your boss to find the right amount and type of communication that works. Donna added, "I would say that my best working relationships have been with employees who communicated not just about their tasks but about their work style and communication preferences. If I know this I can try and incorporate it into how I work with that individual—I guess that means she's effectively managed up."

Opening communications using your manager's preferred style can lead to other rewards. When Bernadette, the head of a gallery at a midsize private university, met her new dean, she quickly discovered that, while he had overseen art collections before, his knowledge was in art history rather than museum professions. As a result, he made decisions about the collection that she did not want, like asking untrained campus facilities personnel to hang rare art. Her attempts to have casual conversations to "correct" his actions were met with stonewalling. Rather than give up and label her boss negatively, she undertook to educate him on her area

of expertise. She knew that he liked information in chunks, and over time she introduced him to the vocabulary of her area, tying it into the actions of the profession. Because she helped him grasp the nature of the challenges within her area, a strong trust relationship developed and positive outcomes flowed. Eventually, her staff tripled and she was able to gain better storage space within the neighboring special collections unit, which her dean also oversaw.

What Do They Want to Know?

Another important part is not just the what, but the how and the how much. How does your boss want the information? Do they want to provide yes or no answers? Is data required to make a decision? While my current supervisor has weekly meetings, he has perfected the "pop-in." If he has a question about some detail, he'll show up in my office without warning. Another supervisor preferred email only. Emma has struggled with a similar situation. She had a manager "who was consistently in panic mode—she would drop in to my office worrying about things that I pretty much always had under control." To help her manager reduce her panic (and to help Emma keep the interruptions to a minimum), she started "sending her regular updates via email on the things I was working on so that if something popped into her mind and she wanted to see if I had it handled, she could see in her inbox that it was on my radar and she didn't need to worry about it." The result was a happier and calmer supervisor, and Emma had more uninterrupted work time.

Deborah, a library administrator at a large research university, struggled to get her boss to meet with her. "I found that it was difficult to schedule regular meetings with him, and he would float in and out of my office without a regular schedule. I also found that if I sent email questions, he would send quite lengthy responses often when all I needed was a yes or a no." She had never worked with someone like this; her past positions were with supervisors who had similar communication styles. She finally realized that she needed to adjust to his working style. "I started keeping a prioritized, running list of issues I needed to talk to him about, and when I did have a complicated issue to present, I sent an email." This led to improved communications and a smother-running operation.

Your Boss's Goals are Your Goals

Align your priorities to your supervisor's. Is the board of trustees being difficult? What does your provost value in an academic library? What are the politics your director is struggling with? What is the wider reputation of the library in your setting? How does the head of your library want to change that, if at all? Having a better comprehension of these issues can help you support him. This is simple to understand but sometimes difficult to carry out. What is important to your supervisor? What goals do they need to meet? In the end, helping them meet those goals will help your boss. Some bosses are clear about such things. Our dean's office sits down each year with every faculty and administrator and reviews, in a collaborative environment, what they can and should work toward over the next academic year. These goals are always in line with the library's strategic plan. However, not all leaders are that clear. In most cases, you may have to ask your supervisor what they most want you to concentrate on. Katherine, an adult services librarian at an urban public library, knows that her boss gets bogged down in details but tends to lose the bigger picture. She balances this relationship by keeping her perspective more widely focused. It works well. "I found that I had to ask her directly, 'What are we trying to do? What are the details that you have that would help me help you?'"

TAKEAWAYS

Like it or not, making your boss's job easier is your responsibility. Using open, respectful communication, sharing the information they want to know, and respecting their positions are good ways to get started. By doing so, like Bernadette, you can turn the mutual respect into greater support for your endeavors.

The librarians who spoke positively about managing up universally mentioned it as a powerful tool. They also believed it made them better managers because they were more aware of the issues they had experienced. Good leaders see different perspectives as assets, not liabilities, and ideally both the leader and the employee look out for the goals of the organization, not for themselves. Managing up can improve your working relationship with your supervisor and in turn have a positive effect on your work and on your library

For more information on the topic, I'd suggest reading *Harvard Business Review*'s series on managing up (https://hbr.org/topic/managing-up).

To start the conversation between you and your supervisor or employee, see UC Berkeley's "Relationship-Building: Managing Up" (https://hr.berkeley.edu/development/career-development/career-management/relationship-building/managing-up).