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Ten Rules for Managing your Boss

When we think of managing someone, we usually think of managing our team members or subordinates. The above title appeared for the first time a few years ago in a Harvard Business Review article written by two well-known socio-psychologists¹. Their argument was that in modern companies, subordinates are not solely dependent on their bosses, but that today's complexity requires interdependence: the boss needs his team as well.

I have the vantage point of being an adviser to top management, a CEO, and now as Co-Director of the PED program at IMD. In addition, I have been involved in the restructuring of a major international company involving some 12,000 people and 12 hierarchical levels. In order to unleash the energies and get closer to customers, we divided the group into 250 "small companies" of some 50 people each and of three hierarchical levels. To change the mindset, we organized a 20-day management seminar, during which we discussed the challenge of how to deal with bosses, who in the old structure, tended to hamper change. The whole process forced me to crystallize my observations and previous experience and test them with the 250 managers. I have grouped the results into ten rules that try to answer some common questions asked by managers with respect to managing their bosses, with the aim of helping the relationship become more effective, foster faster decisions, better decisions and more trust.

1) Decisions: If you do not want a "no" or procrastination, give him/her a hand

Your boss has other subordinates, other decisions to make. Thus, his best bet, if he is pressed for a decision, will be to say no. No, it is too risky; no, we do not have enough evidence; no, it is the wrong timing; no, it is off strategy, etc. To avoid the "no" that will ruin your and your team's enthusiasm, give him a hand (for simplicity, we use "him" from now on in this article):

- Remind him of where you left it last time you met,
- Remind him of the objective rather than rushing to the "what" and "how",
- Remind him of past problems encountered because a decision was not made,
- Quickly summarize the options considered, your criteria for selecting one option – the one you are presenting,
- Tell him what you expect from him: simply to inform, to decide jointly, to share the risk, to add one criterion, to re-examine the option,
- Focus on the points where you need his help,
- Be prepared with facts/data for potential disagreements. Help him with graphics and visuals to grasp the situation fast,
- After your meeting, summarize for him the decision in writing to make sure of the understanding,

¹ Managing your Boss: John J. Gabarro and John P. Kohler, HBR May-June 1993.

" Do not confuse your more frequent problems with the most important ones."

- And finally, once a decision has been made, your way, his way or no way, do not criticize it externally. You have become the best defender; the best ambassador of what was decided.

2) Manage his time: You may represent only 1% of his problems, don't make it as if it is 100%

Yes, you have preoccupations, problems to solve and issues to tackle. However, while your time is entirely devoted to them, do not expect your boss's time to be also.

- The more simple the problem or issue at hand is, the less time you should have him spend on it: prepare, summarize, and synthesize information and options. Do not confuse your more frequent problems with the most important ones.
- Book him for several meetings in advance. Nothing is more frustrating than to have to wait days, weeks or months for that extra new meeting needed in order to finalize a decision or a project.

3) If you ask for his opinion, he will always have one!

Rare are the bosses who, when asked for their advice or their decision, will use the psychological ping-pong approach of retuning the question to the person who asked! And their opinion may not always be that of a genius or a visionary! However, once given, the opinion becomes a constraint: was it an order? So, if you don't want your boss's opinion to thwart your achievements, to slow the speed of decision-making, or cloud the viewpoint, then don't ask for it! Best of all, don't ask if you don't need his opinion.

- Choose the right moment to avoid procrastination. Not only save his time by focusing on big issues, but choose the right moment to do so. If you present an issue at the wrong moment, the chances are he will procrastinate!
- Prepare for your meeting. First because the advantage is to the one who is prepared, second because the preparation will help you reduce the time it takes to come to the central issue.
- Show the forest before the trees in a discussion. If you want to avoid spending a lot of time on going back to basics before he is at full speed with you, start with the basics yourself. Remind him of the objective, where you stand today, and what you want his opinion on.

4) Information is not data

- Turn grapes into wine

You are supposed to analyze the results of a market survey, and not be the mailman who passes the thick document full of statistics to your boss. So be selective; be visual; group the data; bring out what is essential. Data overload creates stress, which in turn can create denial, rejection, and numbness! As a manager, you are paid to collect the grapes (data), and turn them into wine, i.e. useful information.

- Don't give him only the bad news: give him also the good news.
If you keep bringing only bad news, little by little you become the bad news yourself! Don't minimize good news, because you want to focus on the problems. By doing that you contribute to creating a bad atmosphere.
- Make sure he does not get the information from others too often.
Sometimes by being shy about what we should give or because we think it is not relevant, we don't feed our boss with key elements. However, other people could do it before you! And then the hassle starts. "I heard that...", "Why didn't you tell me that..." And then you need to justify yourself; you may need to modify incorrect information. The trade off is between too little information leading to starvation, frustration, and/or restlessness vs. too much information leading to overload.
- Round off!
What helps more to give sense to an amount or a size: 886,262.11 or 890K? What

"If you keep bringing only bad news, little by little you become the bad news yourself!"

makes the decision-making process faster: 79.27% vs. 21.73% or simply 80% vs.20%! Look back at all the tables you sent to your boss in the last twelve months.

- Participate in and contribute to his informal network.

Every manager, hopefully, does not rely solely for managing on formal information given in internal documents and reports! Some people use internal informal networks. Some others also have an informal outside network of experts, friends, business connections that help them shape their vision of the world and how to act. You have yours; your boss has too. Why not volunteer part of yours, so that you do not always have to react and be defensive about information fed by people you do not necessarily think are the best sources?

5) Don't just come with problems, come also with solutions

Good bosses hate two kinds of behavior. The courtesan who always comes to tell you how great you are and the pyromaniac/fireman who comes to tell you "There is a huge problem" and then says "but don't worry, I will solve it!" There is also a third kind, the monkey transferor! He has a problem and he puts it on your shoulders, rather than bringing a solution or at least some options!

- Problems usually have several aspects:

It is usually a gap between an objective and the result; there are options to close the gap; there is a choice of one option to be made; key tasks, dates, people and resources needed must be defined. On which of those steps in problem solving do you want your boss's input? Just be clear on what input you want rather than come with the stressful – "I have a problem..." and throw the monkey!

6) Do not assume he knows as much as you do, but assume he can understand; so educate him

Please help: you are the expert. You spend all of your time and that of your team on the issue. You live with data, pressure points and levers; your boss does not. He does not know more than you do! Most senior executives are even dangerous when they get involved in making micro-decisions, as their point of reference is often not the current one but rather the situation they knew when they were junior managers! If you need his perspective, it is because it is broader; he has a better sense for inter-relationships with other parts of the organization. You have two options.

- You inundate him with technical stuff he does not understand, hoping that the amount of technical jargon will knock him down and force him to agree with you. It may work, but it may become a barrier in communication leading to lack of trust!
- You educate him by simplifying, using easy to understand language, feeding him with articles, examples, best practices, summaries that help him see a perspective. By creating understanding, you relieve tensions; create trust that can lead to better decision-making.

7) Delegation: constantly test the waters

It is not always easy to define *ex ante* what is delegated to a person. Some companies prefer to use the principle of subsidiary rather than the principle of delegation: the principle of subsidiary stipulates that you can do everything except the following list, whereas in the principle of delegation you stipulate, "you cannot do anything except..." Whichever is used, there will always be some doubt whether you have or do not have the delegation. You have two options: either you play it safe by always asking your boss's opinion. This can lead to paralysis, bottlenecks and your own demise, as your boss will think you are unable to take responsibility. Or you assume too much, take decisions and learn after the fact that it was not yours to decide. In between, there is the "test the waters" strategy especially for things or areas, domains or steps that are unprecedented.

8) Do not promise what you cannot deliver, and avoid surprises: trust is at stake!

Trust does not develop overnight and depends a lot on the predictability of the other person: what he says and does, how often he is living up to or not living up to his state-

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ments. In the same way, you will not fully trust you boss if he changes his mind too often or says things contrary to what you were told the last time. You also want to avoid being seen as unreliable by not delivering on what you promise or surprising him with bad news without forewarning. Do not promise dates for finishing projects you cannot handle. If you see that too much is asked of you, sit down and re-discuss priorities before proceeding, rather than becoming yourself a bottleneck. Involve your boss in the process, so it becomes a common priority. Avoid bad surprises. If your job is to be in charge of a particular area, then it is also to be in charge of bad results and improving them. Involve your boss in discussing and evaluating the risks, agreeing on key lead indicators that you will both share, so that neither you nor he will be surprised. For instance, whereas sales are not a good lead indicator, future orders or bookings can be. Cash in the bank is not, whereas good cash flow three months in advance is.

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9) Manage differences in culture

Sometimes at IMD we use a questionnaire called the Power Map to help participants identify their own culture (i.e. values they cherish, leading to certain behaviors), to identify other executives' profiles and discuss consequences on communication and leadership in a team. To simplify, the four main types of profiles that our survey identified are:

- People who like to "control things" and introduce processes, develop more the "now"
- People who are more concerned with people, develop more the impact on people
- People who are more concerned with getting things done, start with key actions
- People who are more concerned with ideas, frame proposals in concepts.

Of course, in managing your boss you should know his personal inclination, as well as your personal bias. If you are process oriented, you will tend to present issues in a systematic and orderly fashion, with pros and cons, chronology of tasks, etc. If your boss is the action type, he could be bored! So in that case an executive summary, emphasizing the key actions and results would be a handy starting point.

10) Don't be sloppy in your documentation. It undermines trust

By making the assumption that he will check what we write or say anyway, and that he will make changes, we sometimes tend to be sloppy in our writing! Tables are not finished, text is not re-read, places we are going to are not visited beforehand, spelling is not checked, and information is missing... By not finalizing your facts, arguments, memos, supporting documents, spelling, etc., you can be sure some things will get changed, mistakes corrected. And soon you will be asked to show more facts and figures, and you will see more changes, more amendments. Soon all the delegation you had will be gone.

Conclusion

Better work between a boss and his subordinate is not just a matter of leadership. It also has to do with boss "management", which can stimulate better performance, faster decision making and accomplishment of more ... by both parties.

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