Managing Up!

In many global cultures and organizations today, managing up is still something most managers at all levels worry about and are not always as skilled to do. Unfortunately, the manager's direct reports can sometimes suffer the consequences when a manager is too preoccupied with managing up. Managing upwards is a skill that all managers need in order to be more effective. Effectively being able to manage up affects productivity, team efficiency, decision-making, workloads, and personal careers. But what does it mean to manage upwards?

What Is It?

Managing upwards is the practice of optimally communicating information, making appropriate decisions, and effectively escalating issues. It is the practice of equipping your next level manager with the things that they need to best manage you - to give you the things that you need. In other words, managing your manager is primarily about helping them to help you. If you change the way you think about your relationship with your boss, it can make the interactions with your boss much more effective.

What Do I Do?

Managing upwards requires these key activities:

1. **Know your manager.** Sounds simple, right? But in order to work best with your manager, you need to make sure you have established a relationship with her/him. You need to know how your manager reacts to certain situations. What motivates and de-motivates them? What values do they admire in others? What are their priorities?

   Is he just venting or is he really mad? Is the silence because of a lack of understanding, or is she thinking about what you just said? You need to think before you react and jump to conclusions. You also need to understand your manager's sense of humor - was that a joke or not? It is amazing how many times miscommunication happens because of a misinterpreted joke or dry comment. Remember, most failures in influencing upwards arise from misreading what the other manager wants from you!

2. **Communicate in the right way.** Know how your manager communicates best. Do they receive information best face-to-face, over the phone, via e-mail?
What do they want to know when? Some managers only want you to involve them when there are critical items to address. Other managers like to be given routine status and updates even if the project is going along smoothly. Even if it is not the way you would communicate that’s fine. What you have to continuously learn is how to adapt to the other’s style. And this becomes even more complicated today since many managers are working within matrix relationships and have two or more bosses.

Know your decision-making boundaries. Make sure you know where the line is. And it’s not a straight line - the amount of authority you have to make decisions depends upon: criticality, budget, people involved, organizational politics, timing, and history. The phrase "It's always easier to ask forgiveness than permission" should not be your guiding principle, but it can work for you some of the time.

3. **Present issues and propose solutions.** Managers, as a general rule, don’t like whining. You can vent occasionally, of course. Make sure that when you bring a problem to your manager, you bring a potential solution or different options with your decision of what makes sense to do. Then, inform your manager of the problem, the impact it is having on the project, and the probable cause(s). In addition, provide alternative solutions, their pros and cons, and how each solution solves the problem. After presenting all the information, you can then tell your manager how you need assistance or advice to solve the problem.

4. **Provide the right level of detail at the right time.** First, you inform your manager why you want discuss a particular situation. Then focus on the information your manager needs to make the proper decision. Start by providing high-level information and provide detailed information if your manager requires it. The higher one moves up the leadership pipeline the greater the potential of being overwhelmed with too much data and too little time. Give the big picture assessment of a situation – get their attention focused on where you need them to be focused. Later you can get into the details. Even if you report to a manager that micro-manages and likes all the details, give them the high level perspective first and the effect it’s having on customers, the business, etc. Then move into the details that your manager needs.

   **We have the tendency to delve into the details, but that is not always necessary.** Watch for the glazed look on your manager’s eyes - that is your visual indicator that you’ve gone into too much detail. And remember, if something is critical, do not wait until your regular one-on-one meeting, involve your manager immediately.

5. **Listen "between the lines."** There may be times when your manager either can’t or won’t tell you exactly what to do in a situation. Since you are the project manager, it is your responsibility to make the decision. So listen for the underlying message your manager is giving you. And pay attention to what your manager doesn't say.
**Sometimes what is not said is more important than what is said.** Finally, be aware of decisions that involve organizational politics. In some cases these decisions have a lot more to do with the people and or the departments involved rather than what appears to be the best solution to a situation.

Most managers today have to deal with a boss that is a tough, results-driven manager so orient your discussions and dealings with them around results - what you can deliver and when.

- Facts and figures oriented - so cut out the incidentals, be able to measure and substantiate anything you say and do for them, especially reporting on results and activities. **Don’t give too much detail, they get lost in the numbers of the analysis – give them a summary, the most critical information or your conclusions based on your analysis.**
- These managers generally don't understand or have an interest in human dynamics, so don’t try to appeal to their sense of humanity or morality. Set your own objectives to meet the organizational aims and get agreement with the manager. Be seen as self-starting, self-motivating, self-disciplined and well-organized. The more the manager sees you are managing yourself and producing results, the less they'll feel the need to do it for you.
- Always deliver your commitments and promises. If you are given an unrealistic task and/or deadline state the reasons why it's not realistic, but be very sure of your ground, don’t be negative; be constructive as to how the overall aim can be achieved in a way that you know you can deliver.
- Stand up for yourself, but constructively - avoid confrontation. Unless it’s an issue of safety or discrimination, don’t threaten or go over their heads if you are dissatisfied because working with them will be a lot more difficult.
- If the manager tells you how to do things in ways that are not comfortable or right for you, then don't question the process. Simply confirm the end-result that is required, and check that it's okay to “streamline the process” or “get things done more efficiently.” if the chance arises they will normally agree to this, which effectively gives you control over the “how”, provided you deliver on the “what” and “when.”

And this is the essence of managing upwards - focus and get agreement on the results and deadlines. If you consistently deliver, you'll increasingly be given more leeway on how you go about the tasks, which amounts to more freedom.

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