



What does it take to manage up?

By Lori Silverman

Jamie (not her real name) was frustrated. She had been in her new position for four months. During that time, she had encountered a challenging employee issue in addition to a host of political balancing acts that resulted from working in a subsidiary of an overseas company. Try as she might, she could not get her boss to actively help her with these situations. So, in a workshop on leadership skills that I was teaching, she asked participants if we could brainstorm ideas about how she might effectively manage upward.

What does it mean?

Managing up is about finding ways to shape and mold the behaviors, responses, opinions and thoughts of an individual who is senior to you in the organization. The recipient could be your boss or others with whom you interact on a daily basis.

What keeps people from managing up?

Through talking with Jamie, we realized she had never tried to manage up before. This is not unusual. Foremost, fear of what might happen or of making the situation worse prevents subordinates from trying to guide more senior individuals. Not being encouraged to attempt this behavior and not knowing how also keeps them from trying it.

We encouraged Jamie to believe that she has the right to manage upward and to be confident in her own technical skills and abilities. And, we determined that she had a relationship with her boss that was based on mutual trust, respect, honesty and keeping confidences — elements that form the foundation for managing up.

What works

Those who successfully engage in managing up behavior share a common mindset about

how to approach more senior individuals.

First, people who manage up come with pure intentions. They engage in these behaviors because they focus on the ultimate benefit to the department, business unit or organization. They are not thinking “what’s in it for me?”

They are never condescending, adversarial or threatening to the person whose behavior they are shaping. They treat the leader in a gentle, upbeat manner. When sharing information that may be outside the comfort zone of the recipient, they are subtle in their approach to stretching these individuals. They take great care in paraphrasing what the more senior leader says while simultaneously planting a seed for a shift in thinking or action. They also find it helpful to repeat a story the person told them (“I seem to recall you telling me about ...”) — as a way of feeding a leader’s own advice back to him or her. Being a good translator is important here: Rephrase what you know or have heard from others in a manner that is palatable and understandable to the person.

Finding a safe environment within which to have these conversations can be beneficial. Consider a neutral location — on or offsite — and someplace where others will not overhear the discussion.

What Jamie realized from these ideas is that she had been using a more direct tack when raising sensitive items with her boss, laying everything out on the table at one time and expecting an immediate response. For her, being successful in the future means taking a slower, more deliberate and less obvious approach.

What does the other person need?

There is another side to the managing up equation: What do you know about the senior person you want to manage? In Jamie’s

situation, she needs to figure out what makes her new boss “tick” — his hot buttons, needs, expectations, background and experiences. This includes: How is the person perceived in the organization? How can you continue to increase the individual’s credibility? What would the person consider motivating?

Knowing the best method to approach her boss will also help. Does he prefer to initially have a seed planted by e-mail and then a follow-up conversation? Or does he want to learn a bit in person first and be left to ruminate on it? Or, would he prefer a well-timed voice message? This is especially important if the information to be shared deals with a blind spot in the leader’s work style and could be received as a surprise.

And you?

What about you? How well do you manage up? What you could do to improve your skills?

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