

Manage Up to Manage Your Career

By
Mariette Edwards

“You don’t have to like or admire your boss, nor do you have to hate him. You do have to manage him, however, so that he becomes your resource for achievement, accomplishment, and personal success.”

-Peter Drucker

When clients ask me how they can exert more power over managing their career, managing up is where we always start. It is the fastest and easiest way to position you for achieving that goal. Here’s a story from my own career archives as an example.

In 1974, I went to work as Employee Benefits Administrator for a Fortune 500 sugar refining business on Wall Street in New York City. This was my first big job opportunity and I really wanted to be a success. At the time, Employee Benefits as well as Risk Management, Personnel (what they called Human Resources back in the day), Accounting, Finance, and Credit and Collections were under the direction of the Chief Financial Officer.

The CFO was characterized by my co-workers as the "The Ice Man". I found out why a few minutes into our first meeting. I don't recall why I was there but I do remember his, "Why are you wasting my time?" attitude. Then he asked a question. When I couldn't answer, I was dismissed. Our second meeting was an even bigger disaster.

Angry and determined to have a better result if I ever had another chance, I got busy figuring out what kind of person he was and what his questions represented. I quickly concluded that I was short on preparation. As the "money" guy, he wanted facts, figures, information and solid recommendations to help him make a good decision. I, on the other hand, was more of a creative, big picture, big ideas, wave my arms around kind of person, not so focused on details--an obvious mismatch of styles. But I could adapt! So, if details were what he wanted, details were what I would give him! To improve my self-confidence, I practiced in front of a mirror, out loud, over and over and over. (Did I mention that he was the most powerful senior executive I had ever presented to?) By the end of our third meeting, the “Ice Man” was beginning to thaw. It was as if I had learned to speak a foreign language! We completely understood each other. After that he began taking an interest in my career.

Impressed with my drive and determination, he informed me shortly before the end of my first year on the job that he was going to teach me how to become a vice president of the company. His instruction began by introducing me to key players, including me in senior level meetings and lunch meetings at private Wall Street clubs. (Women did not go to those clubs then. This was an enormous coup!) Division Presidents began asking ME how to work with this man more effectively. Over time, I became responsible for Risk Management and Personnel. I was invited to serve on the Pension Committee where I

worked alongside both the Chairman of the Board and the CEO! I became privy to corporate secrets and was “in the know” on some very interesting business deals.

At the time, I never could have imagined that deciding to meet this man at his map of the road could open a door to opportunity that would serve me the rest of my career. As a result, today I know how things work and how to move comfortably through the innermost circles of the corporate world. In my zeal to make a success of my first big job opportunity, I had stumbled onto the power of managing up!

This story illustrates the central theme in every managing up scenario--information! The more you know about yourself and your boss and how you each communicate, the more effective you will be in managing up. That is, provided you are willing to change and have the courage to act! If you do, here are a few things to remember.

- **Pay attention.** Other people tell us everything we must know to communicate with them. What is your boss telling you? What are you telling him?
- **Go first.** Don't wait for your boss to figure you out. It almost never happens. Take the initiative.
- **Maintain a good attitude no matter what.** A bad attitude will sink your career faster than inexperience.
- **Build relationships inside and outside the organization.** The stronger your network, the easier it is for you to pass along opportunities that match your or your boss's goals
- **Do good work.** Managing up is not a substitute for poor performance. Make sure you are known for the excellence of what you do.
- **Increase your visibility.** Get out of your cube and walk around. Talk to people, make new friends, have lunch with co-workers. Send memos. Look for opportunities to visit other departments. Volunteer.
- **Keep your boss informed.** Give him good news and prepare him for bad news by providing solutions as part of the process.
- **Put it in writing.** Keep a log of meetings and communications with your boss including a synopsis of what was said, the request and/or result.
- **Build trust.** Be reliable, honest and dependable. Keep your boss's interests in mind. Avoid political situations that could undermine your relationship with your boss.
- **Build an information network.** Make it your business to be in the know.
- **Stay out of politics.** Take no position, align with no one, be a resource for all.
- **Learn the art of selling.** Learn to sell your ideas by leaning into your boss's style and keeping his goals in focus.
- **Learn to negotiate.** Possibly the second most important skill in managing your career, mastering negotiation skills will give you an edge in achieving your career goals.
- **Learn the rules.** Every organization has its own set of operating rules. Study and observe the careers of those you admire in your company. Apply their formula to your career.
- **Be a good follower.** Ask good questions, get clarity about expectations and over-deliver on results.

- **Look for opportunities to help your boss achieve his goals.** Include your boss's goals in presenting new ideas. Step back and see how your boss might see a situation and respond accordingly.
- **Plan for success.** Prepare, prepare, prepare for every important communications event.
- **Be humble and grateful for the opportunities your good work creates.** Nothing is more unattractive than arrogance.
- **Use your new power wisely.** Managing up will build your power base but power can corrupt. Be careful how you use it.

Knowledge is power! The more you know about yourself and your boss and how you each communicate, the more power and control you will have over your own career.

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