



Managing Your Boss

Your role in this critical relationship

By **David G. Jensen**
Contributing Editor

WE'VE ALL HEARD THE HORROR STORIES: The job-seeking engineer who found that every new employer initially interested in him lost interest after checking his references, or the scientist who consistently lost the battle about where her name would show up in publications coming out of the lab. What these stories—and many others like them—have in common is an imperfect relationship between the employee and the boss.

Managing Up, a 1999 AMACOM release recently made available in paperback (Michael and Deborah Singer Dobson) opens with what the authors' call "The Parable of the Gun," a story that very quickly helps the reader understand why the boss/subordinate relationship can be so unique. Here's a paragraph:

Imagine for a moment that you are sitting in a room with someone carrying a loaded gun, and you happen to be unarmed. That person may not harbor any ill will toward you or have any intention of shooting you. But it's hard to ignore the reality that the other person does have the power, and it's accordingly hard to be completely natural, completely at ease. The power dynamic is unequal, and that doesn't make us comfortable.

—from *Managing Up*, AMACOM, New York

While it may not be as dangerous as a gun—at least in the short term—the power your boss holds over you can still keep the relationship out of balance. Do you feel helpless in dealing with this difference in power? Well, you aren't. That, anyway, is the conclusion of the authors of *Managing Up*. While it may take many years before your present boss considers you his equal, there are things you can do today that will help equalize many of the factors that lead to stress in the relationship.

Is Anyone Really Cut Out to Be a Boss?

When you think about it, how many people are really qualified to lead? Not many, I suspect, and certainly not me. Still, someone has to manage, and many poor managers are functioning right now as someone's supervisor. The world of science is full of brilliant scientists heading up laboratories despite having poor interpersonal skills and worse leadership ability. Although it depends upon the organization, the path to leadership doesn't always select for good managers, and these skills are rarely taught in technical programs at the university.

Is there anything you can do to survive and flourish in the 'bad boss' environment? Peter Drucker, one of the world's

foremost business-management authors, writes about this topic in his book *The Practice of Management*. In what was likely a call to arms for the authors of *Managing Up*, Mr. Drucker wrote: "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." At the core, whether she's a good manager or a bad one, your boss is there to help you launch your career and to be a resource for your personal growth—whether she knows it or not.

You must remember the success of this relationship is your responsibility, and it must be managed shrewdly. When you were brought into the firm, an obligation fell upon you to get along with the boss. The key to your successful relationship with this important person will be the quality of the alliance you build with him or her. And when it comes to building that alliance, you're probably on your own.

Building a Solid Alliance With Your Supervisor

I've selected several recommendations from *Managing Up* that seem to fit with what I know about the majority of Contract Pharma readers. These are presented below, each with a short explanation.

The DBMP-BMA Rule

"Don't bring me problems, bring me answers." While you may often need to consult your boss for guidance, it is wise to remember that managers value their time more than anything else. Sit down and analyze your situation before you talk to the boss. Figure out how to describe the problem succinctly and work out several proposals for a recommended next step. Don't be offended if your supervisor doesn't take your proffered suggestion; the fact that you've prepared the way for a productive conversation will go a long way toward showing that you respect your boss's time. Your careful formulation of the problem will also make your boss a better decision-maker, which will benefit both of you in time.

The Law of the Slight Edge

One thorn that can easily irritate the boss/subordinate relationship is that technical staff often neglect their long-term goals because of all the challenges and sideline items that crop up. The relationship with your boss could be greatly improved

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if you were to get a slight edge on that big picture each day. Of all those project goals you have discussed with your boss, which do you believe is most important? What is your boss's above-all-else goal for your department during the course of the next year or two, and how does your work fit into the big picture? Make steady progress by spending 45-60 minutes each day on long-range beneficial work that gets you closer to the goals you and your boss have set for your work. Did you know that this slight edge, an hour a day, adds up to more than 200 hours or 25-30 eight-hour extra workdays in a year? Imagine how much you could get done with twenty-five full days of effort dedicated to the big picture (as opposed to today's minor setbacks).

Be the Glue

Be supportive, not competitive. The world of work can be terribly cutthroat. The wrong atmosphere inside your department can hold back progress and drive your boss to become more of a referee than a coach. While some competition drives research forward, bickering and arguing have no positive attributes. Many bosses will admire and respect the person who holds the team together.

That doesn't help you much, however, when the supervisors themselves are bickering and abusive. Regrettably, this is the preferred management style of some bad managers. In these situations, you must be very careful not to appear to be challenging your boss's confrontational style, but you can still be the glue, nonetheless.

Another type of "glue" is also effective—and valued. In science or engineering, the person who nurtures collaborations is greatly admired. Here it is not about conflict, but about facilitating positive relationships, and some technical staff just naturally seem to keep people working on the same page, without appearing to be directing anything. What a rare and wonderful talent that is to develop!

Follow the Platinum Rule

The 'Golden Rule,' which suggests we treat others in the way that we like to be treated, doesn't work as well as this one: "Do unto others in the style they would prefer to be done unto." This refers to the importance of understanding others' communication styles. I highly recommend that you learn how your boss communicates, and determine the best way to approach him or her. Is he most concerned about results, people, reasons, or pro-

cedures? Is she authoritative, democratic, self-directed, or systematic in her leadership style? Each piece in this puzzle helps you figure out the best way to relate to your boss, by communicating in the style that he or she appreciates and understands. That old-fashioned 'golden' rule assumes that everyone wants to communicate in the style that you like best. No way!

Learn To Handle Criticism

While some bosses are great at giving criticism, most of them just blurt it out and leave it to you to determine its effect. Some people are crushed; they learn very little and let it affect them emotionally. In order to build an alliance with your boss, you'll need to face criticism on your own terms. Can you find regular times to sit down with your boss and get feedback? These structured opportunities for constructive criticism are more likely to yield helpful information than those "blurted out" comments that come after a mistake. You'll also reduce the emotional impact of the comments because you are expecting them. As the Dobsons say in *Managing Up*, when you ask for negative feedback it is generally delivered with less force. I like my criticism served up on demand, and not when I am least expecting it.

You Will Work for a Bad Boss

This month's column may be of the "clip and save" variety, because even if you get along great with your boss, you'll someday have a supervisor who needs managing. It's easy to feel complacent when you've got the nicest boss in the world, but that boss—like the person holding the loaded gun—has a power that you cannot totally comprehend until it is used against you unexpectedly. It isn't being paranoid to work on your relationship with the boss before something falls apart.

Even if you and your boss have the most secure relationship in the world, the ideas discussed in this month's column may help increase the level of support that you are seeing from that very important person. This alliance-building process will help your boss understand that your career success and professional growth will benefit her as well. ■

Reference

Managing Up, Michael and Deborah Singer Dobson, 1st Edition
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