

The Perils of Managing Up

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"Managing up" means recognizing that your boss is spread thin and extending yourself so that you're easy to manage. It involves being extra diligent in your efforts to support your supervisor and your team. Managing up is a strategic initiative. It can help forge a cohesive, productive relationship between you and your supervisor. Dana Rousmaniere [writes in the Harvard Business Review](#), "Even if your boss has some serious shortcomings, it's in your best interest, and it's your responsibility, to make the relationship work."

Finding a fit with your boss is important. Extending yourself to ensure that the relationship remains productive and healthy is typically a good move. But the strategy can lose its luster if your boss takes advantage of your diligence. Instead of feeling like you're going the extra mile to facilitate a healthy team, you're probably feeling like a sucker. That's neither a comfortable nor a sustainable vibe to foster.

Leadership Qualities That Make Managing up Feel Wrong

While you want to make your boss's life easier, you don't want to give your boss full range to treat you like his or her personal assistant if that's not in your job description. You want to be helpful and agreeable, but you don't want to stack the deck against yourself by volunteering to absorb work that will make your job intolerable. Your goal is to communicate a willingness to support the team, and to further its agenda. But you also want to hone an awareness of where your lines are drawn.

Sean Olson, author, executive coach, and chief executive officer with [Renogize Professional Coaching](#), explains that he has observed the potential for problematic professional relationships between faculty and staff. Olson notes that he's seen instances of "faculty misusing staff even to the point of treating them like personal attendants."

Olson notes that there can be a "huge divide between faculty and staff." He explains that this may result from assumptions that some faculty members may harbor: that because staff members support faculty's classes, scholarship, and research initiatives, they in essence support the faculty members themselves. Olson describes it as the "mentality that because I'm faculty, everything I ask for is supreme."

Clearly, this is problematic. In this instance, it seems questionable that managing up is actually a sound strategy. Instead, it seems to invite what Olson describes as a "misuse of staff."

How to Deal

If you sense that your manager's expectations and requests are inappropriate for your role, a good first step is to recognize and strategically manage your own feelings and frustrations. This can be difficult. It's hard to respect the authority of someone who misuses that authority.

But frustration isn't helpful at work. It's not in your best interest to stew in anger. Finding a valley of calm from which to operate will help you more, so try to find a way to make your peace with this situation.

You are always learning new things at work. Some are professional skills that are a thrill to add to your tool kit. Others add to your soft skill tool kit, like dealing with difficult coworkers. You are always building that tool kit too.

Skill building can be taxing, so try to look at this like you're working a new muscle. The grace and composure with which you handle this situation will make you stronger and enhance your professional prowess.

Strategically Advocate for Yourself

If you're in a position where you think that your manager isn't respecting your professionalism, aiming to be a clear and purposeful communicator may prove helpful.

Olson demonstrates how to enact this strategy using this example: A faculty member asks a staff member to prepare scores of copies for a class he's teaching. But he only gives the staff person an hour's notice, rather than a couple of days to prepare the materials. This is a difficult situation that does not position the staff member for success.

Olson recommends that the staff person deliver on the request to the best of his ability so that it addresses the immediate need. Olson points out that a polite request for a future conversation can follow. Olson proposes: "Do the job, but in that moment say 'I really want to talk about how this will happen in the future.'" Olson recommends following up in that later conversation with a unifying statement such as: "What can we do to make this work better for both of us?"

In this example, the staff person is explaining to the faculty member how he would like to be managed. The approach is clean, professional, and productive. It's also a good strategy to document that the conversation took place.

Olson also recommends getting a sense of the chain of command, so that if the problem persists you can consider elevating it.

Establish Parameters

You may also consider reviewing your job descriptions to find clarity about your role. Review your position and your manager's. Those responsibilities are subject to the ebb and flow of what is needed, but use the framework you have in writing to clarify.

Then meet with your manager and share your observations, noting where you've taken on additional responsibilities. Aim to formalize changes your boss has made to your job description by putting them in writing. If your boss truly values your contribution, he or she will champion your career goals.

The Power of Managing Up

Your diligence is powerful. If your manager chases away good staff because he or she misuses that dedication, that is his or her management flaw. Your diligence will be a precious commodity on the job market.