

Managing Up – A Necessary Skill for Everyone

Almost everyone is a manager. Some do it fulltime, others part time. For some it is their job, for others it is a key tool or technique to help accomplish what needs to be done. As you can see, this is a broad definition of management. We're not just talking about managing people who might report to you. We're talking about managing in all directions; down, up and sideways.

Of these, one of the most important, least understood and generally poorly practiced skills is managing "up." This is the ability to effectively guide, influence and even manipulate your supervisor and others higher than you are on the organizational chart. This skill is essential to any successful career, regardless of your position, whether you manage people or have taken the technical or professional path and manage work, customers, concepts or ideas.

Why is managing up so important? Because up is where the power and influence is and up is probably where you want to be. Even if you don't care about those ideas, the fact is that people above you on the org chart generally have more influence, experience and insights than you have and can help you get things done better and faster. All you have to do is convince them they want to help. That is what management is all about – getting people to help you . . . and the best way to do this is by convincing them they want to.

Up includes more than just your supervisor. Focus on at least two levels, so you include your supervisor and his or her supervisor. Then look to their peers, the other executives at these levels who may be able to either help you get things done or help your career. These are the people you want to know, influence and eventually manage.

How can you effectively build the relationships and have the influence you need to be effective with these executives? There are many things you can do, but they all seem to fall into the following four practical guidelines.

1. Know the rules.

This is especially important with your supervisor. It is not just understanding your job description and the success measures you need to accomplish. These are important, but they are also obvious and fundamental. You will never accomplish anything extraordinary if you stop here. You need to go beyond this and understand how much freedom you have in making decisions; when you need to involve your supervisor; when you need to just communicate decisions and when you can work independently. You need to understand what his special interests are, what he is most concerned about and how you can effectively work with and for him or her.

You need to understand the unwritten rules he expects you to follow and, to make this more challenging, the rules will change over time, as you gain experience and he becomes more comfortable with you. Most importantly, you need to build a relationship based on trust where every surprise is good.

Everyone has rules, not just your supervisor. Meeting expectations becomes more difficult with others, however, because they generally will not take the time to explain their rules to you. They will assume you know them. It is critical that you spend the time and make the effort to understand their biases, quirks and assumptions. If you do not understand what they expect and how they will react when you work with them, you run the risk of being seen as someone who "doesn't get it." Nothing is more damaging. It carries the connotation that you are not smart or perceptive enough for them to spend the time developing.

You need to pay close attention to what occurs whenever you meet with all people of influence. Pay special attention to the successes and failures of others who work with them. It is easier, faster and less painful to learn from what others do. Try not to make all the mistakes yourself.

2. Know how people see you

Having a realistic understanding of how people see your strengths and weaknesses is essential. The key is being able to do this objectively. Do not let your view of your own abilities and talents color this picture. Remember, their view will mostly come from their own experience and interactions with you. What would you believe about you if you had these experiences? As you begin to understand this, test your conclusions against how they react to you and the other signals they give. Keep in mind that their view will evolve over time. Keep revising your understanding so it is current.

The real value of this exercise comes when you compare these viewpoints against how you see yourself. Identify areas where you need to improve and ways to accomplish this. Then put a plan together on how you will change their view of your strengths and weaknesses to bring them more in line with how you actually are. You will see progress as clarification. They will see it as growth. In either case, it is progress and beneficial for you.

3. Be competent

This is, of course, the foundation for all success. You must do a good job, all the time. Pay special attention to quantifying your accomplishments. Try not to allow your success to be vague. For example, which of the following is more impressive and gives more confidence in someone's ability – a person who made a department more efficient or one who reduced expenses by 23% by implementing 17 process improvements? When someone wants to compliment your performance, help by giving him concrete, specific sound bites.

Never sell yourself short by taking short cuts or achieving temporary successes by playing politics, taking credit for the work of others or by doing other devious things. Success based on these actions never lasts. People who employ this strategy should also plan to change companies frequently.

4. Demonstrate your capabilities

Always make sure you do a great job in your job. If you are unable to perform well in your current position, it is unlikely you will get other opportunities. Once you have done this, however, look for opportunities to show your talents and abilities in other areas. Start by emphasizing areas where you are particularly strong. Build out from your base -- your job and the abilities that everyone generally recognizes.

Volunteer for projects and committees. Show that you can work well with peers. Show that you understand how to get things done with influence rather than direct control. Look for projects that will show that you can effectively deal with strategic issues. Demonstrate that you can deal with executive issues and situations.

Prove that you would do a great job if you were at the next higher level in the organization. Promotions easily follow when everyone agrees it makes sense. Show that you belong where you want to be.

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