

How I Got Here: Boss-Management Tips from the Pros

By Geoffrey James

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Those who have made it to the top of the corporate ladder know that getting there requires good business relationships. Along the way, each successful executive must develop his or her own strategy for boss management. To learn the secret wisdom of this ancient practice, we interviewed five top executives about what strategies they used with their own bosses when they were on the way up.

Master Your Message

Exec:

Doug Razor, vice president of emerging medical applications at Texas Instruments

Previous Experience:

Razor was previously global vice president of strategic marketing at TI.

"When I was selling the idea of digital photography up the chain at TI in the mid-1990s, I was so passionate about the idea that I thought there was something wrong with anybody who didn't get it. However, I soon learned to tailor my approach to match the personality of the decision-makers. There was one guy who was really old school, buttoned down, and all about managing according to the numbers. The problem with new products, though, is there's no way to measure the future. So I made my best guess at the numbers—growth rates, revenue, and so forth—and plugged them into Excel to make them look more real. That worked, and he got on board. There was another executive in the chain who was pretty much the opposite—very intuitive. With him, I just explained why digital photography would be better and cheaper than chemical photography: No numbers, just the concept. He gave me 20 people and told me to go off and develop the product."

Lesson Learned:

Tailor your approach to match your manager's style of thinking.

Stick Your Neck Out

Exec:

Bob Carr, CEO of Heartland Payment Systems

Experience:

Carr built Heartland from a tiny services firm into the world's sixth-largest payment processor, with \$835 million in revenue.

"Here's a great story for people who have stubborn bosses who take insane positions. At one point, new investors in Heartland thought the company was already worth three times as much as they had invested six months earlier, and therefore they were unwilling to pay me fairly as the CEO to grow the company. We each became entrenched in our positions, so I said, 'Well, let's just sell the company.' We put the company up for sale—a humiliating process for me, the founder, because I did not want to sell, as they well knew. The bids we received were for much less than the amount the investors were claiming the company was suddenly worth. After that process, they decided to pay me fairly to grow the business, and three-and-a-half years later, we were a public company worth ten times the value they had paid just five years earlier."

Lesson Learned:

When you know you're right, offer to put your beliefs to the strictest test.

Work the Crowd

Exec:

Jack Cooper, president of CIO consulting firm JM Cooper & Associates

Experience:

Cooper is the former CIO of Bristol-Myers Squibb.

"In the mid-'90s, I worked on the 47th floor at Bristol-Myers Squibb, which meant that I ended up riding the elevator with other key executives. I got very good at being able to summarize, during that 40 second elevator ride, exactly how our technology investment was helping that executive to be more successful. As a consequence, come budget-time, when I asked the big boss for the money I needed, I had a chorus of voices backing my request."

Lesson Learned:

To manage upwards, you must also manage sideways.

Improve Your International Relations

Exec:

Rod Keller, vice president of worldwide sales for Cisco's Linksys division

Experience:

Keller was formerly general manager of Toshiba's U.S. PC business.

"Japanese companies, including Toshiba, want to control everything from corporate headquarters. This makes it difficult for executives who are deployed internationally, because you can end up having responsibility for success without having enough authority to make it happen. I instituted a regular series of monthly visits to Toshiba's corporate headquarters to build strong relationships

and make certain that what we were doing had proper visibility. It took eight years for Toshiba's top management to completely understand that our team knew what we were doing and could be counted upon to deliver the goods. By then, there was less second guessing from headquarters, and we could operate with a reasonable amount of autonomy."

Lesson Learned:

Understand the culture of the people you work for, and when it's different from yours, expect that upward management will take longer.

Know When to Fold 'Em

Exec:

Spencer Clark, management consultant at Executive Development Associates

Experience:

Clark was formerly a general manager at General Electric, an executive at Black and Decker, and the CEO of several smaller firms.

"Early on, when I was at GE, I got placed under a crotchety old field engineer who had gotten promoted to get him out of the customers' hair. He was an absolute tyrant and had a set of values and work habits that were the exact opposite of my own. As much to keep my sanity as to find a way out of there, I started working on professional development and ended up becoming an early adopter of Jack Welch's "Workout" initiative [a business-improvement methodology developed by GE's former CEO]. I never did learn to get along with the tyrant, but the extra effort led me to my next job at GE and eventually to the career I have now."

Lesson Learned:

If you fundamentally don't get along with your boss, start making strategic moves toward a different job.
