

Five Myths of Managing Up

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Like just about everything else in the workplace, the conventional wisdom about how to manage the boss has evolved considerably in recent years. If you hope to climb the career ladder by impressing your boss, these are the new and revised rules of the road.

Myth #1: Always be in the office before your boss arrives.

Conventional wisdom:

If you're even five minutes late, the boss will think you're a slacker.

Why it's a myth:

In an age of flex time, telecommuting, Blackberries, and instant messages, bosses care more about whether you're getting the job done than whether you're warming your seat.

Try this instead:

Make sure the boss knows you're putting in extra hours at home or on the road, both by maintaining a rapid-response email or instant message presence, and by hinting at when you're putting in those extra hours.

Example:

"I had to work over the weekend on this report, but I think you'll agree the extra effort was worth it."

Myth #2: Ask for permission before bringing up difficult issues.

Conventional wisdom:

You want your boss to be in a good mood when you deliver bad news.

Why it's a myth:

Thanks to email and cell phones, word travels faster than ever. If you don't tell your boss the bad news, somebody else will, and then you'll look evasive or stupid—or both.

Try this instead:

Deliver bad news in the context of what you're doing to fix the situation or make it better.

Example:

"The Acme sale fell through, so we're launching a quick sales campaign with the other customers to make up the revenue loss."

Myth #3: Suggest ways to make the boss more popular with the team.

Conventional wisdom:

The boss will appreciate your efforts to improve morale and teamwork.

Why it's a myth:

If your boss is unpopular, there's very little you can do to change that perception.

Try this instead:

When boss-bashing takes place beyond his earshot, don't join the fray. Instead, give the boss credit for things he does well. When the department spy (there always is one) reports back to the boss, he'll learn that you're an ally.

Example:

"Yeah, Joe loses his temper sometimes. But he's really good at defending our interests in front of the budget committee."

Myth #4: Protect your boss from your underlings, and vice versa.

Conventional wisdom:

If your boss talks directly to your team members, information could be revealed that you'd rather keep under wraps.

Why it's a myth:

Attempting to control the flow of information inside today's wired-up corporations is utterly pointless.

Try this instead:

Cue your underlings to reinforce the message you're giving the boss.

Example:

"When the big boss asks what you're doing, be sure to point out how well you're supporting our group's quarterly sales goal. She likes that kind of thing."

Myth #5: Never say anything to the boss when you're angry.

Conventional wisdom:

If you're hot under the collar, you're likely to say things you'll later regret.

Why it's a myth:

Your emotions aren't the problem; the issue is how you express them.

Try this instead:

Don't lose your cool. When you're frustrated or angry, say so—but without blowing up or exploding. Avoid whiny complaining. Instead, focus on fixing the things you want to change, and ask for the boss's help in changing them.

Example:

"Okay, I understand we need to get the report done. But let's come up with a plan that doesn't involve everyone working over the holiday."
