

How to Manage Your Boss

By Geoffrey James

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It's nice to imagine that the success of your career rests upon your basic competence at doing your job, but that's only half the picture. Raises, promotions, and other perks depend directly on how well you can manage your boss. If he or she doesn't warm up to you—or worse, doesn't remember that you exist—you'll never land the plum assignments you need to get ahead. In addition to performing well, you have to make sure the boss knows about all the things you're doing right, while also building personal rapport so that he or she will keep your best interests in mind.

Things you will need:

- Little or nothing. You can't buy respect.
- An hour or two a week. Be sure to schedule prep time before every meeting with the boss.
- **A Decent Boss:** If your boss is truly evil, getting closer is a bad idea.
- **Chocolates:** Or other bribery for the boss's admin. He or she is the gatekeeper of valuable information—not to mention the boss's agenda.
- **Your "Done" List:** Keep track of everything you've accomplished or initiated lately, so that you're prepared when the boss asks how things are going.
- **Empathy:** Put your ego aside if you want to be able to understand the qualities and objectives your boss values most.

A yellow sticky note with the text 'step 1' written in black, with the number '1' in red.

Make "Keeping the Boss in the Loop" a Regular Activity

Goal: Reassure your boss that you know what you're doing.

The secret fear of every boss is that employees are screwing up and either not telling anyone or (even worse) aren't aware there's a problem. To reassure themselves, bosses may sometimes pick an aspect of an employee's job and begin randomly asking penetrating questions about the details. If you answer these queries with grace and aplomb, the boss assumes you're competent. Hesitate or evade, and the boss may assume all your work is slipshod.

Since you don't know in advance which questions your boss might ask, be prepared for every contingency. "One of the dumbest moves you can make is to walk into the boss's office unprepared," says Jack Cooper, the former CIO of Bristol-Myers Squibb. "For every hour that you'll spend meeting with your boss, you should spend ten hours making sure you can answer any questions that the boss might ask."

Ten hours of prep? For a one-hour meeting? Okay, that's probably overkill for a typical employee who interacts with his boss on a daily basis. But for senior managers at big companies where meeting with the CEO is an event on par with a presidential visit, Cooper's 10-to-1 formula makes sense.

Checklist

What Your Boss Expects: The Basics

1. **Credibility.** Follow through on assignments and do what you say you're going to. If you want your boss to trust you, your word has to carry weight.
2. **Professionalism.** Bosses appreciate individuals who are serious about what they do and willing to take the time to achieve a deep understanding of their craft.
3. **Integrity.** The test of integrity is whether you'll take a stand, even when it's unpopular with your boss. The boss has the final decision, but it's your job to make sure it's the right one.
4. **Caring.** Bosses value relationships with direct reports who care about them. Show that you're truly concerned about what the boss has to say by responding with solutions rather than complaints or excuses.
5. **Knowledge.** Bosses need people who have unique expertise. You don't have to be a pro at everything, but you do need a specific area of knowledge that your boss values.

step 2

Create a Core Message for Your Boss

Goal: Bosses are forgetful. Make sure yours knows just how valuable you are.

When you're working your butt off, it's easy to assume that your boss knows exactly what you're doing. But even though she may have assigned your work to you, in the crush of daily pressures and changing priorities, your contribution easily gets lost in the shuffle. Worse, you could end up pursuing goals that no are longer important priorities.

According to Spencer Clark, a former general manager at General Electric, the cure for this creeping invisibility is to become a one-person marketing group, constantly positioning your contribution. "Your most important task is to market your services to your immediate boss," Clark says.

To do this, create a "core message"—a brief summary of exactly what you're doing and why it's vital to the boss's success. A core message might be, "My team is designing the follow-on products to our most successful product line," or "I'm recruiting the hard-to-find technical personnel required for the new R&D facility." Then, Clark suggests, find a way to work that message into every conversation that you have with your boss—even hallway chats.

Hot Tip

Self Promotion Without Smarminess

If marketing yourself to your own boss feels a little slimy, think about ways you can casually talk things up without overselling—and without driving your core message into the ground. Each interaction should add new information, and when you can, fold the message into the day's news, for example: "I just got off the phone with a candidate for the R&D job. We're getting resumes from some really impressive people."

step 3

Tap a Vital Resource: The Boss's Influencers

Goal: Enlist others to spread the word about your importance to the company.

You may think you have a one-on-one relationship with your boss, but you're actually part of a crowd of people—from your peers to your boss's peers to your boss's bosses—who influence the boss's decision-making. Their comments and gossip will inevitably affect your boss's opinion of you and your work, so you want to be certain that, if they're not actively singing your praises, at least they're reading from the same hymnal.

Create a list of everyone who carries weight with your boss. Include their job title and whatever you know about their background and role inside your firm. Now craft a variation of your core message that positions what you're doing as helpful to each person. Then use that to frame any conversations you have with them. "You want a consistent message coming from the entire organization, not crossed wires that might confuse the boss about your importance to the organization," says Ken Evans, former North American VP of sales and marketing at Waste Management.

For Example

Supporting Messages

Audience	Message
Your Boss (VP of Marketing)	I'm developing a channel sales program that will increase revenue and profit. (core message)
VP of Engineering	This new program will get the products you're designing out to as many people as possible.
VP of Manufacturing	With channel sales, we'll be able to predict demand, which will cut down on job overruns.

VP of Human Resources

The program I'm developing will let us expand the business without exceeding headcount limitations.

CFO

With channel sales, we can sell products at a 20 percent higher gross margin than with direct sales.

step 4

Learn Everything You Can About Your Boss's Career

Goal: Understand where he came from in order to know what he expects.

Now that you've convinced the boss that you're competent, it's time to make yourself invaluable. To do this, you deliver what the boss wants—even before he knows he wants it. Over time, of course, you can observe and learn, but fast-track the process by researching the boss's career and asking questions that will help you understand his way of thinking. This activity has a side-benefit—your boss will be flattered that you're interested.

Use the Internet, the grapevine, and the boss's admin to learn about the boss's work history. Then, when appropriate, find opportunities (such as during lunch or offsite meetings) to express a healthy curiosity about your boss's experience. Apart from the fact that most everyone enjoys talking about themselves, bosses find this kind of inquiry valuable because it provides an opportunity to explain the logic of their decision-making processes. "Understanding somebody's background always helps illustrate how that person might approach a situation," says Mike Fister, CEO of Cadence Design Systems and a former senior vice president of the Enterprise Platforms Group at Intel. "I often find myself drawing on my experiences at Intel to illustrate a strategic or tactical point."

Nitty Gritty

Sample Questions for Your Boss

- "I was on the web learning more about our industry and I noticed that you presented at the [name] conference. What kind of response did you get?"
- "Your admin mentioned you used to work for [name of firm]. What was the most valuable thing you learned from that experience?"
- "I hear you used to work in the [name] industry. What are the main differences between the way that industry runs and the way this one runs?"

Cultivate Compatible Personal Interests

Goal: Do you play golf? Love football? If not, it may be time to start.

The ideal situation is to have a boss who looks out for your interests during difficult times. This protectiveness is nurtured when the boss thinks of you not just as a competent contributor but as a kindred spirit. If you want a more expansive and resilient relationship with the boss, cultivate an interest in something that also interests the boss. Ideally, this should be an interest or activity that segues nicely into the work experience. For example, if your boss likes to talk business while playing golf, learning to play—and enjoy the game—will inevitably bring you closer.

"To really understand your boss, you need to see him or her as a person, not just as a business contact," explains Dilip Phadke, Hewlett Packard's director of business development strategic initiatives. "My current manager is a big soccer fan, and although I was never particularly interested in soccer, I keep up on the topic because it gives us something to talk about that's not directly work-related but can be used to illustrate the value of teamwork, planning, and so forth."

Voice of Experience

"Likeability is a matter of intention and behavior rather than of personality and chance. To become more likeable, find similarities and then raise them to the surface. If you can find something that you truly like and respect about a person, then that person will naturally like and respect you. While this may seem manipulative, it's not, because if you truly like somebody, you will be committed to help making that person more successful."

—Robert Cialdini, author of "Influence: the Psychology of Persuasion" and "Influence: Science and Practice"