Working effectively with your boss

The phrase “managing your boss” means working consciously with your superior to obtain the best results for yourself, your boss, and the company. This essential process is often ignored by otherwise talented and successful managers.

Boss/subordinate relationships involve mutual dependence between two fallible human beings. Subordinates who fail to acknowledge this either don’t try to manage the relationship, or do it badly.

Some people underestimate how much their boss relies on them, disregarding the boss’s dependence on their cooperation and expertise. Others see themselves as not dependent on their boss, glossing over how much help and information the boss provides. The manager’s need to be seen as self-sufficient means he or she undervalues the boss’s critical role in supplying vital resources and connecting the manager to the rest of the organisation.

Many managers assume their boss will automatically know what they need, and provide it. This is dangerously unrealistic. A safer assumption is that moderate help will be forthcoming, and that managers should actively seek the help and information they need from their boss.

To make the relationship effective, you need a good understanding of your boss’s strengths, weaknesses, work style and needs – and of your own. With this knowledge, you can develop work practices that meet both sets of needs, are compatible with both work styles, and are characterised by clear mutual expectations.

Start by thoroughly assessing your boss and his or her context. What are your boss’s strengths and weaknesses, long suits and blind spots? What about his or her organisational and personal goals? What pressures are there on your boss? What is the boss’s work style? How does the boss prefer to receive information? Does he or she thrive on conflict, or try to minimise it?

Successful managers actively clarify the boss’s objectives and potential pressures. Rather than taking information at face value, such managers are alert to opportunities to test their assumptions by asking questions; they also pay attention to clues in their boss’s behaviour. This continuous process of assessment and clarification helps managers stay attuned with the boss’s changing priorities. You may not be able to alter your boss’s fundamental style, or your own, but you can become aware of what facilitates and impedes working with your boss, and make decisions accordingly.

You also need to understand your own responses to your boss. Typically, the subordinate is more dependent on the boss than vice-versa. This can lead to frustration when the boss uses their authority to constrain actions or options. Some managers respond impulsively – rebelling, getting angry, undermining decisions, treating the boss as the enemy – in a display of counterdependent behaviour. Such managers often have a history of difficult relationships with authority, and struggle particularly with directive or authoritarian bosses. Ironically, the manager’s behaviour can push the boss to actually become the enemy: sensing hostility, the boss loses faith and trust in the manager, shrinking the communication pipeline.

At the other extreme, some managers swallow their objections and behave compliantly even when the boss makes a poor decision. Overdependent managers frame the boss as an all-wise parent who knows best, even if the boss might welcome disagreement or be prepared to change decisions if presented with a strong argument. Such managers rely on the boss to guide their careers, provide all training and resources, and protect them from ambitious peers.

Both counterdependence and overdependence lead managers to an unrealistic view of their superior. They see the boss as an enemy or a parent figure, rather than a fallible human being.

Changing your fundamental relationship with authority usually requires psychotherapy, but understanding the extremes can help you modify your responses to your boss. If you know you tend toward counterdependence, you can predict and aim to mitigate your overreactions. If you are apt to be overdependent, you can question whether your compliance helps or hinders your boss’s effectiveness.
Here are some key characteristics of a healthy and effective relationship with your boss:

**Compatible work styles.** Find ways to work with your boss’s style. A logical, focused boss will respond better if you ‘cut to the chase’ rather than discuss and explore. If your boss is a ‘reader’, send information by memo, then discuss it; if your boss is a ‘listener’, talk it through first, and follow up with the memo. Notice whether your boss prefers a hands-on role in decisions, or whether you are better to report only significant problems or progress.

**Mutual expectations.** Ultimately, you as the subordinate must take responsibility for finding out the boss’s expectations. If your boss is vague, create ways to clarify expectations. Some subordinates draft a memo of workflow and submit it for approval. Informal conversations about ‘our objectives’ can also help. Make sure your boss knows your expectations, too, to avoid unrealistic goal setting.

**Flow of information.** Bosses commonly need more information than subordinates naturally think to supply. Ensure that the boss is told what they need to know, in the style and level of detail that suits them best. This includes identifying problems, even if the boss prefers to hear only the good news.

**Dependability and honesty.** Your boss needs to be able to count on you. Be realistic about delivery dates, and deliver on time. Avoid shading or playing down issues. Earn autonomy through honesty.

**Good use of time and energy.** Be selective about your demands on the boss’s time and energy. Don’t use up the boss’s most precious resources on trivial issues.

Managing your boss effectively is important. It can simplify your job hugely by eliminating potentially severe problems. Successful managers take responsibility for their achievements, and recognise that success relies on actively managing their relationships – including their relationship with their boss.