

BY LAURA BOGOMOLNY

It happened again. While you were hunched at your cubicle, buried beneath a pile of facts and figures, creating yet another detailed report for your demanding boss, Buster from the fourth floor was promoted. Just like Sandra was three months ago, and Bill eight months before that, and John four months before him. You know your work is top-notch. How come you aren't climbing the ranks, too?

Maybe you simply aren't managing up. Companies today are adopting flatter management structures, and, as a result, there are fewer opportunities for promotion across the board. So cultivating a strong relationship with your boss (or bosses) could be the key to getting ahead. As Michael Stern, an executive search consultant in Toronto, emphasizes, you cannot advance your career merely by being a good worker—your boss has to *perceive* you to be a superior and committed worker, too. By employing certain communication and organizational strategies, you can earn your supervisor's stamp of approval in no time—and possibly improve your chances of making it into his or her office along the way.

If you aren't interested in political manoeuvring, don't be alarmed. This isn't about sucking up, nor about being Machiavellian. No one is suggesting you rush out and buy hockey tickets in order to take your boss out for a night on the town. In fact, Jeffrey Fox, president of a marketing consulting firm in Avon, Conn., and author of the bestselling book *How to Become CEO*, makes it a hard and fast rule that you should "never get buddy-buddy with your boss." Says Fox: "You always want to be seen as independent of favouritism—you should try to be invisible, almost."

Within reason, of course. Sandi Mann, a professor of occupational psychology at the University of Central Lancashire in England, argues that the more you present yourself to be like your boss, "the more favourably you will be perceived." She notes that important business often takes place outside of official office hours, and acknowledges it can pay off to be in the



Taming the giant

SMART STEPS TO GETTING NOTICED BY YOUR BOSS

right place at the right time. So joining the gang for a drink after 6 p.m. isn't always a bad career move. Nonetheless, Mann does warn that there is a fine line—and that too much posturing will make you "come across as a bit of a slimeball." What's more, she says that today's politically correct crowd won't stand for backroom wheelin' and dealin', and that the benefits of participating in the "old boys' network" may be on the wane.

But whether or not you schedule weekly tennis matches with your boss, building a compatible relationship with those higher up the ladder is essential to being effective in your job—and to influencing your own career path. And while the phrase "managing your boss" may spook a few supervisors—the knee-jerk reaction is to interpret "managing" as

"manipulating"—if you think of the exercise as building partnerships, the concept becomes much more palatable.

Reminding yourself that your boss is a regular human being is a good first step. Stern says "there is a tendency to think the person you are reporting to has different motivations, but, by and large, they put their pants on one leg at a time just like you do." It's helpful to keep in mind that, in terms of career, family, finances and health, your boss probably has similar concerns to you. Nonetheless, he or she does have the upper hand in the relationship. In order to be considered a first-rate employee worthy of promotion, you must deliver what the person in charge wants, when they want it, and all in a desired format. And that requires you to understand not only what your boss's organizational

MANAGING UP

Look up, way up

These tips can help you manage your career—and your boss, too

In 1980, two Harvard Business School professors published a groundbreaking article titled “Managing your boss.” John Gabarro and John Kotter’s study railed against the widely held view that an employee would only manage relationships upward for personal or political gain. They argued that consciously working with your superior can help obtain the best possible results for you, your boss and your company as a whole. Here is their “Checklist for managing your boss,” updated in 1994:

1. Make sure you understand your boss, including his or her:

- goals and objectives
- pressures
- strengths, weaknesses and blind spots
- preferred work style

2. Assess yourself and your needs, including:

- strengths and weaknesses
- personal style
- predisposition toward dependence on authority figures

3. Develop and maintain a relationship that:

- fits both your needs and styles
- is characterized by mutual expectations
- keeps your boss informed
- is based on dependability and honesty
- selectively uses your boss’s time and resources

SOURCE: HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW

priorities are, but also his or her preferred method of communication, too.

It is absolutely essential to get to know your boss’s style. Some managers like receiving long reports filled with every imaginable detail, while others require only your recommendations or conclusions. Some supervisors exert dictatorial control and expect you to be at your desk nearly

non-stop, while others take a laissez-faire approach and permit flexible work hours. Some bosses are very proactive, wanting you to assist with their grand schemes, while others are reactive, expecting your help in coping with external events. Determine what makes your boss smile and what makes her tick, and tailor your work habits to fit her tendencies.

Mann’s book, *Managing Your Boss*, includes a questionnaire to help you analyze your superior’s leadership and thinking style. Among the questions posed: Does your boss often talk about vision and dreams for the company? Does your boss stick rigidly to the rules? Is your boss easily distracted? Is your boss rarely late for a meeting, and does he dislike people who are? Answering these types of questions helps clarify whether your boss’s style is consultative, bureaucratic, dictatorial or charismatic.

Equally important is determining how your boss likes to receive information. Face-to-face meetings? Telephone calls? Detailed written reports? E-mail? If you have a new boss, don’t assume that whatever communication method worked in the past will continue to be the most effective. The experts all recommend directly asking your manager about what type of communication methods he or she prefers—and then remaining diligent in employing them. Even though you may love e-mail, if your boss wants voice messages, you’d better get accustomed to picking up the phone. Similarly, you may detest pumping out reams of data, but if your boss is a numbers guy, keep on plugging in the digits.

While questioning your boss about his preferred communication techniques, it would be wise to inquire about his organizational priorities as well. Patti Hathaway, a Westerville, Ohio-based management consultant and author of *Managing Upward: Strategies for Succeeding with Your Boss*, explains that knowing which projects are “red-flagged” can be very useful. For example, if you are part of an IT team and your boss tells you that his No. 1 goal for the year is to overhaul the company intranet, volunteering to be on the task force that will figure out how to make the conversion is a wise career move.

Persuading your boss to reveal priorities may be easier said than done, however. Some bosses are not very articulate, others may be too busy to chat, and still others may not be entirely sure what the priorities actually are. Hathaway recommends uncovering what is important by using more subtle strategies, such as looking for keywords in your manager’s speech. If your superior often tosses out the phrase “customer service,” for example, make sure she knows you excel in this area. If “innovation” is a buzzword around your office, demonstrate your creativity. Listening for themes repeated in meeting



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after meeting is another means by which you can ascertain priorities.

Establishing yourself as a top-tier employee is one thing; maintaining the impression is another. One way to hold on to your elevated status is to keep your manager well-informed, especially if there is a major problem coming down the pipeline. But *never* surprise your boss. Tell managers about delays or disruptions pronto, and brief them on the good as well as the bad through regular informal feedback. If you *do* wind up as the bearer of bad news, turn the event into an opportunity to shine—propose solutions rather than dwelling on problems.

Not to be overlooked is your relationship with your colleagues. While Fox warns against growing too chummy with co-workers (“sooner or later you are going to have to be the person that is promoted faster than them”), Hathaway emphasizes the importance of teamwork and honesty, and points out that it can be nearly impossible to complete your own tasks successfully without support from your co-workers. She also cautions that if you overlook colleagues and eventually get promoted above them, “they will make your life miserable because they know you just did the political thing.”

The old adage about making your boss look good still rings true. Do everything in your power to ensure your boss is on top of his or her game. Remind your superior of commitments he or she has made, offer suggestions for improvement, and sometimes even play devil’s advocate. Not only will you be boosting your boss’s performance; you will also be positioning yourself as an equal in your manager’s mind. Position yourself for advancement by strategically escaping your reputation as a lowly underling.

A Gallup poll from the late 1990s of one million employees reported “it is the employee’s relationship with their immediate supervisor that will determine how long they stay [in a job] and how productive they are while there.” Rather than sitting on the sidelines, waiting for your annual performance review to roll around, take the initiative to ensure you are delivering what is wanted, in the way it is wanted. As Stern says, if you are proactive, you can ensure that you are thought of more positively, increasing your chances for raises and promotions.

Start managing up now, and one day maybe you’ll have the luxury of having to worry about managing *down*, too. ☐

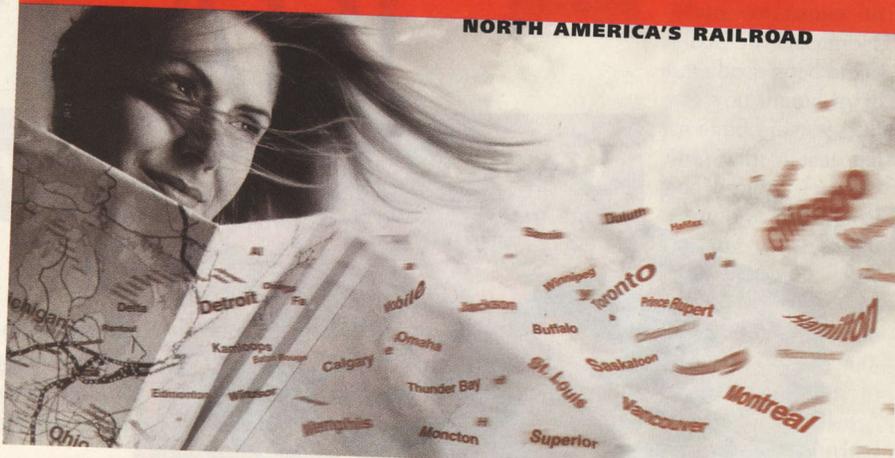
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