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MANAGEMENT & CAREERS

How to Manage Up at Work



Managing up can improve your day-to-day working life and your career trajectory.

PHOTO: TAMMY LIAN AND JAKE ZUKE

By [Allison Pohle](#)

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In brief

- ♣ Managing up is all about making your supervisor's job easier.
- ♣ Adapt your behavior to match your boss's management style.
- ♣ Manage up by scheduling a conversation with your boss to set expectations for how you will work going forward.

If you have ever had a difficult boss, you are not alone. According to a 2019 survey of 2,800 workers by staffing firm Robert Half, about half of respondents had quit a job because of a bad manager. But whether your manager is difficult or supportive, your working days may be improved if you learn how to manage up and adapt your behavior to suit your boss's work style.

What is managing up?

Managing up boils down to this: Making your boss's job easier. But that doesn't mean you have to be a sycophant, says Mary Abbajay, president and chief executive of Careerstone Group LLC and author of "Managing Up: How to Move Up, Win at Work, and Succeed with Any Type of Boss." She says: "It is about learning how to work well with somebody who may work differently than you." When you manage up effectively, she says, your relationship with your boss works for you, for your boss, and for the organization.

Why should I manage up?

The workplace is a social system, says Ms. Abbajay, so relationships matter, especially the relationship you have with your boss. Your manager may have control over what projects you work on and your visibility within the organization. "Your boss has a lot of influence over your career trajectory," says Ms. Abbajay.

Managing up can also make your day-to-day life easier, says Eric M. Bailey, chief executive of Bailey Strategic Innovation Group and author of "The Cure for Stupidity: Using Brain Science to Explain Irrational Behavior at Work."

"If you've ever had a boss or supervisor that you actually liked, it makes working there just so much easier," Mr. Bailey says.

How do I manage upward?

Ms. Abbajay says managing up is a simple three-step process, but cautions that simple things aren't always easy. Here are her tips:

1. Pay attention to who your boss really is. It is important to observe your boss as he or she is, not how you want him or her to be. Make note of your manager's work style, personality and priorities.
2. Assess yourself. Be honest. How do you show up in the workplace, what are your strengths, your weaknesses, your priorities and your pet peeves? Ask yourself what it is really like to work with you.
3. Think about how you will adapt your interactions. Once you have determined the ways in which you resemble and differ from your boss, you can decide how you will adapt your interactions with your boss. You cannot control your boss, but you can control how you react to her or him, Ms. Abbajay says.

How can I adapt my behavior at work?

Altering our behavior is challenging because most of us like the way we operate, Ms. Abbajay says. "I tend to be a very fast talker and that works for some people, but when people ask me to slow down, the first thing I think of is, 'Well, can't you just listen faster?'"

she says. What we need to do instead is figure out how to be adaptable and work with people who are different from us. Here are some tips:

- ✦ Identify what frustrates your manager, and avoid doing it. Is it showing up late? Is it interrupting people? Don't do whatever drives your manager nuts, says Mr. Bailey. "A lot of times we think, 'Well, it should be their job to tell me what to do, not the reverse,'" he says. But a productive way to build the relationship is to do what your boss expects.
- ✦ Ask questions at the beginning of a project so you understand the expectations. Often, we believe we are supposed to know things, and don't ask for clarification because we don't want to be seen as incompetent, says Mr. Bailey. But managers judge incompetence after something is done incorrectly. "If we just take a little extra time and get that clarity, we start to really develop an understanding for what our supervisor is looking for," he says.
- ✦ Keep your boss in the loop. Don't assume your boss knows how productive you are or what you are working on, says Ms. Abbajay. This is especially important while so many people are working remotely.
- ✦ Be proactive. Don't wait to be told what to do. If you know your boss has a quarterly report to prepare for, don't wait for your supervisor to come to you for help. Instead, ask what you can do to help your manager prepare, says Ms. Abbajay.
- ✦ Own your mistakes. Don't try to cover up your mistakes. Instead, be humble and bring forward a solution. If you own up to what you did and present a solution to correct for the mistake in the future, there is not too much a supervisor can be upset about, says Mr. Bailey.
- ✦ Offer solutions, not problems. No manager needs to have a bunch of problems dumped in his or her lap without some suggested solutions, says Ms. Abbajay. "Always be the person that is bringing solutions."
- ✦ Make requests, not complaints. Every complaint you have is really a request, says Ms. Abbajay. For example, instead of complaining that there is not enough time to finish a project, ask your boss to let you know which parts of the project need to be done first, and which can be done later. "When you make an effective request, you want to make sure that you've thought through it and how it is going to be beneficial to the team," she says.

How can I work toward my career goals if my boss is frustrating?

It is important to remember that people often get promoted because they were good at their previous roles, not necessarily because they are excellent managers, says Ms. Abbajay. Many companies don't adequately train supervisors until they have been in management roles for an extended period, she says. "So the chances of you having a boss who's less than perfect for you are pretty high." To manage a challenging boss:

- ✦ Assume some positive intention. "Just because someone is difficult for you, doesn't mean they are a difficult person," says Ms. Abbajay.
- ✦ Have patience. When we communicate, we don't often say every thought we have in our heads. When you have a boss who seems to be acting irrationally, it is important to realize that he or she usually has a reason for his or her decisions, says Mr. Bailey. Ask for clarification and try to have patience.
- ✦ Consider how to adapt your behavior. If your boss is a micromanager, he or she likely needs certainty and information, says Ms. Abbajay. Instead of getting frustrated, flood your boss with information. "Figure out what they need to get trust with you and give it to them," she says.

•Try not to cast your boss as a villain. It is natural to want to vent about how awful your boss is, says Mr. Bailey. But when you do this, you look for more evidence to reinforce this so-called villain story. By changing the story we tell, we can change the relationship with our boss, he says.

How should I manage up if my boss says one thing, but does another?

Sometimes managers send mixed messages. For example, your boss might say he or she wants everything in writing, but then tell you he or she doesn't have time to read your reports. In situations like this, it is best to follow your boss's behavior, rather than what the manager says, according to Ms. Abbajay.

How should I approach managing up as an entry-level employee?

Even if you are new to the workforce, you shouldn't be intimidated by managing up. Here are some things you can do:

- Make note of your boss's communication style. Is he or she verbose? Succinct? An introvert? Or an extrovert? If you have an introverted boss and show up to meetings being very gregarious, your boss might start to avoid you, says Ms. Abbajay.
- Pay attention to your boss's goals and priorities. Don't assume you know what your boss's professional goals are and try not to judge them if you don't agree with them, says Ms. Abbajay. "I hear this all the time: 'Oh, my God. My boss just wants to get promoted, he just wants to look good for his boss.' And I think, 'Well, don't you?'" Knowing what matters to your boss can help you better align yourself to help him or her meet goals.
- Be aware of the company's culture and objectives. "The system in which you are working is going to have a lot of influence over how people behave in that system," says Ms. Abbajay. So pay attention to what your boss's boss worries about. This will help you to understand what is driving your manager's behavior.

What should I do if my boss and I got off on the wrong foot?

It is never too late to discuss expectations with your boss. If you would like to improve your relationship, ask your boss if you can meet because you are looking to better yourself as an employee, says Mr. Bailey. Phrasing the conversation this way is critical because you don't want your manager to worry you are asking for feedback because you want to leave. "You're trying to be better for them because that is what this is all about: Building that relationship with your supervisor," he says. Here are some questions Ms. Abbajay suggests asking when you meet:

- What can I do more of, less of or differently to work well with you?
- What are your top priorities and what is the highest priority to you?
- What are your goals for the team, organization and yourself?

- How can I support you with your own manager?
- What is your preferred mode of communication?
- How do you like to be approached regarding a problem or challenge?
- What does success look like to you?
- What else do I need to know about working well with you?

Resources

•[Managing Up Virtually as an Employee](#), a free LinkedIn Learning course instructed by Ms. Abbajay.

•[Ask A Manager](#) answers common reader-submitted questions about workplace issues, including supervisor troubles.

•[“What Makes Employees Head for the Hills?”](#) is a 2019 survey on workplace satisfaction produced by staffing firm Addison Group.

What to read next

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•[How to Change Careers: Find What to Pursue Next](#)

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•[In the Covid Economy, Laid-Off Employees Become New Entrepreneurs](#)

•[The Right and Wrong Way to Manage Up at the Office](#)

•[How to Handle the Chaos of a ‘Tornado Boss’](#)

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