

Tomorrow's Academic Careers

Managing Your Boss

Know Thyself

In Chapter Ten we suggested that a look in the mirror is a good first step in dealing with difficult people, and the same holds for bosses—difficult or not. The plethora of books about bad bosses (see, for example, Graham Scott, 2005; Kellerman, 2004; Kets de Vries, 2003) tells you something: lots of people have worked for one—or thought they did. But it's critical to know how much is you and how much is the boss. If your relationship with your boss is rocky, what's your contribution to the strife? If you want more influence in negotiating with your boss, what can you do to increase your credibility? If you feel overwhelmed by a continuous stream of demands, like Jeffrey Hall, how are you responding to them? If you are frustrated by a boss who seems overwhelmed and reluctant to use the power of position, how do you react to the leadership vacuum? The answers to such questions are at the heart of an honest diagnosis of your situation.

A relationship with a boss carries a special twist because power differences are a central feature of the relationship (Carlone & Hill, 2008). Your boss almost always has more power than you, up to the ultimate sanction of firing you. Tenure, if you have it, may offer job security as a faculty member, but does not ensure your right to continue to enjoy the resources and rewards of administrative work.

In the face of power differences, Gabarro and Kotter (2008) advise understanding and avoiding two common reactions to authority. One is overdependence—responding to a boss in a fearful or overly compliant manner. Jeffrey Hall could just print and sign anything the boss tells him to, but that will not serve him or the president well. The alternative stance is counterdependence—resistance to being controlled—which often leads subordinates to reject, resent, or battle authority. If Hall simply balks at signing the letter, he may not teach Louise Fulsome anything about the situation or about the impact of her leadership. That's no favor if she is unintentionally digging herself into a leadership hole. The key to leading up effectively is the development of a collaborative relationship of mutual respect and influence—despite the reality of uneven power. Knowing something about your response to authority—and where you fall on a continuum between the two extreme reactions of overdependence and counterdependence—is baseline information for determining how your predispositions might affect your relationships with bosses. Many of us gravitated to careers in college and universities because we like autonomy and independence, but those characteristics can hinder our ability to deal with difficult and demanding bosses. Reflect on the bosses you have had during your career. Which have worked best for you? Why? Your answers are a clue to what you need from your boss.

Understand the Boss

Good working relationships with a boss require an appreciation of the boss's pressures, problems, and working style (Kotter, 1985). It's a mistake to wait for your boss to fill you in on his or her reality. Take the initiative and ask about it. Like you, your boss has goals to achieve in a context of constraints and pressures that you may not be aware of. You need to understand the boss's priorities and problems so you can better gauge how your performance makes your boss's life easier—or harder. Demanding, needy, or oblivious subordinates tend to have a short shelf life, even for the most patient and nurturing bosses. It's also important to understand how your boss wants to work with you. You may enjoy long

meetings and lots of face time or maximum autonomy to run your own show, but that doesn't mean your boss does. Find out how your boss likes to communicate so that you can deliver messages in a format that works. Don't project your needs on your boss—or expect that the boss you have will be the one of your dreams. Jeffrey Hall has strong feelings about President Fulsome's stance toward the union, but it's less clear that Hall has given significant attention to trying to understand the problems and pressures that Fulsome is experiencing or why she believes her strategies will get her what she needs. Knowing those can help him craft his message and develop a stronger and more open relationship with her.

Give the Boss Solutions, Not Problems

As much as possible, make your boss's job easier, not harder. Your boss probably has at least as many problems and pressures as you do and doesn't need you to make life harder than it already is. It is wise to consult with your boss on issues that might wind up on her desk anyway, but she is likely to be grateful and to have more confidence in you if you arrive with well-researched and thoughtful solutions. When your implicit message is "Solve this problem for me," you raise red flags about your initiative and your strategic capacities. When you say, "Here's what I see. Here's what I've done. Here's what I've learned. And here's my plan. Any advice?" you keep your boss in the loop without putting one more problem on her plate. If Jeffrey Hall tells President Fulsome that sending the letter to Kacmarsky is a bad idea, he's offering a problem without a solution. But if, for example, he drafts an alternative letter and offers a rationale for why this will produce better outcomes for the college, he makes it easier for the president to say yes.

Use the Boss's Time Wisely

You're busy, and your boss is probably busier. You want to maximize the value of the time you spend together. That means using it on the things that are important to both of you. Bosses, of course, vary; and the better you know what your boss expects, the better the choices you can make. As a general rule, busy bosses don't want to be besieged with lots of tactical questions and small logistical issues—unless they have asked for that. They want the big picture stuff and want to know that you are working within the goals, parameters, constraints, values, and expectations they have set for you. Use your boss's time to show that you are focusing on the things that matter—or to check in if you aren't sure. Meetings oriented around ensuring that you and your boss are in sync on values and goals are likely to be winners. Unless you know in advance that it's a brainstorming session, come prepared to meetings with your own prioritized agenda. You'll keep yourself on track to get what you need. You'll also show that you respect your boss's time and that you have done your homework.

Avoid Surprises

If you can help it, never let your boss be blindsided! If there's something developing in your unit that could produce an explosion or generate a negative story in the local media, alert your boss immediately. You want your boss to understand the issues, know the risks, and, ideally, to support whatever you're doing to deal with the problem at hand. It may go without saying, but it's important enough that it can never be said too often: All your choices should be clear, clean, and ethical. Transparency is increasingly important in higher education and elsewhere. Live by the old adage: Everything you do at work should be something you—and your boss—would be proud to see described on the front page of the *New York Times* or the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Keep Promises, Deliver on Commitments

You build credibility and trust by doing what you say you'll do. The more your boss trusts you and is confident that you will consistently deliver on your commitments, the easier it is to get the support and resources you need to go forward.

Speak Up When Necessary

Useem (2001) notes that the biblical prophets Abraham and Moses sometimes pushed back and persuaded their God to change course when they felt the Almighty was about to make a big mistake. Bosses are not infallible and are not well served by subordinates who hesitate to tell the truth about potential fallout from their judgments and decisions. An important test of leadership capacity is willingness to speak truth to power. Even tenured faculty sometimes fail this test because they cannot overcome their fears or excessive deference to authority and voice uncomfortable truths. Mindless attacks and reckless personal insults are unproductive. But both authors, even as untenured junior faculty, had occasions to tell senior administrators that we thought some idea or initiative was wrong. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the candor increased our credibility.

The same was true for General George C. Marshall, who became one of the most revered and trusted military leaders in American history. On more than one occasion everyone around him thought he was committing career suicide by telling his commanders the truth that they did not want to hear. He did this as a young colonel in confronting General Pershing during World War I, and later with President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the run-up to World War II. In both cases, the bosses concluded that Marshall was someone that they could trust.

Jeffrey Hall needs to be able to speak up effectively with President Fulsome if he is to develop a relationship of influence and mutual respect. When speaking up seems risky, it is often a good time to experiment with inquiry. You can argue directly with some bosses; it's futile with others. But asking the right questions can often accomplish the same result. In Jeffrey Hall's case, there is no shortage of significant and provocative questions he could ask President Fulsome. "So what do you think the fallout would be if we send this letter and Kacmarsky spreads it all over campus?" "Would you want to send the letter if it gets the faculty and the media saying that we don't believe in academic freedom?" "What if this letter makes Kacmarsky a hero to his members and costs us at the bargaining table?" Such questions could help Hall understand Fulsome's thinking and might provoke her to think again. Saying what needs to be said is risky and from time to time may leave a few battle scars. But leaders need to hear the truth, and telling it is a way to be authentic and to have influence and opportunities in areas that you care about. That's what leading up is about.

Not all bosses present the same impatient, damn-the-torpedos approach of President Louise Fulsome, but the same seven steps for managing your boss can help develop a more productive working relationship with those who lead in other ways. Occupying a very different niche on the leadership spectrum, for example, is the cautious, hard-to-read boss who communicates sparingly, responds slowly, studies issues excessively, and rarely takes initiative. Subordinates' teeth may grind as they wait for their boss to stand up and do something—almost anything. They wonder whether to hold back or charge forward in the absence of clear signals about what the boss wants (or doesn't) and will support (or not). If you find yourself with such a boss, it is urgent to take initiative to avoid playing in an endless version of Waiting for Godot. Such bosses need their subordinates' help, whether they know it or not. The trick is learning to do that in a way that does not raise your boss's fears or defenses.

Start with Know thyself. It helps to ensure that you have a clear understanding of your own contribution or collusion in the relationship. Taking initiative to understand the boss by spending time and asking questions is particularly helpful with undercommunicative bosses. Give the boss solutions, not problems works well with passive bosses who often find it easier to approve your suggestions than to come up with their own solutions. Avoid surprises responds to a basic concern of timid bosses, whose inaction often stems from fear that anything they do might cause something bad to happen. A strong track record and your capacity to keep promises, deliver on commitments will build trust and reduce anxiety. The courage to speak up and the willingness to find a voice that facilitates relationship building are particularly important and powerful with bosses who are themselves reluctant to say what they're thinking and feeling. Your openness and compassionate professionalism will model a different approach to academic leadership—and can help your boss to learn and grow in the role.

Summary

Leading up is as important as anything else academic administrators do. Their capacities to take risks, make a difference, and survive in their jobs depend on support and mandates from above. Wise campus leaders attend carefully to relationships with more powerful players in their institution, pursuing goals of partnership, open communication, and credibility. They try to ensure that they understand themselves as well as their superiors' concerns and interests, and they do their best to make things easier rather than harder for their bosses. They rely on the basic proposition that if you deliver for your bosses, he or she is likely to return the favor.

A seven step strategy can guide academic leaders in developing a more productive relationship with their bosses:

1. Know thyself.
2. Understand the boss.
3. Give the boss solutions, not problems.
4. Use the boss's time wisely.
5. Avoid surprises.
6. Keep promises and deliver on commitments.
7. Speak up when necessary.

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