

Business Lessons: The Politics of Safety and Managing Up

**Mark D. Hansen, CSP, PE, CPEA, CPE
Director, Portfolio Environmental and Risk Management
Natural Gas Partners Energy Capital Management
Irving, TX**

“In politics, your enemies can hurt you, but your friends will kill you.”

Introduction

No matter where you work there are politics, whether you want to admit it or not. Managing the employee who work for you is one thing, but managing your peers and your boss are quite another. Managing your peers and your boss or, managing up has several connotations. One definition is managing peers through your boss. The other common definition more often used is “sucking up.” As you might imagine, there is a lot more behind “managing up.” Master it and your path up may be cleared. If you fail to master it you may find it to be a career stopper.

In a perfect world, all managers would be idyllic. However, in the “Real World,” managers are human and not perfect. They are often far from perfect. I’ve learned much about how to be a good manager from those bosses who were bad managers. I’ve also learned from the great managers, who lead people and manage things. What you will find here are some of the things I’ve learned through my career regarding this sensitive topic.

It is unfortunate, but the world is replete with unskilled managers. These unskilled managers cause sleepless nights, anxiety attacks, depression, headaches, ulcers, fights with coworkers, absenteeism, overworking, and/or substance abuse, etc. Why are there so many poor managers? Some are promoted based on technical expertise and not management ability and often with no training. Some are promoted because they have been there the longest or based on seniority. The thinking is that they know how the company works, however, they may have no skill in managing people. And thirdly, some are promoted for political reasons.

As a result, your boss may have been placed in this position for reasons other than performance. You must come to grips with this and deal with it. Therefore, you must accept that your boss has limitations. We all think that our boss should:

- Be more organized, know how to delegate,
- Spell out what is expected, of me,
- Give me some time and attention,
- Appreciate me more,
- Give me positive feedback, etc.

Well, you have two choices. You can complain or you can acknowledge that your boss isn't perfect and manage up. To successfully execute a managing up strategy you must understand and accept that your boss has limitations as a manager. You must take ownership of the relationship. In other words, you must be willing to take responsibility for improving the relationship.

Five Pivotal Practices of Managing Up

Over the years, I discovered that there are five pivotal practices of managing up. They are as follows:

1. Train your boss to meet with you regularly. Find a time convenient to his / her schedule and make it a regular time slot barring any emergencies. Keep it short in duration, say 15-30 minutes. If you do this weekly then this amount of time should be ample. Keep your thoughts focused and on point to specific issues and upcoming events and milestones.

2. Come to every meeting with a detailed agenda. Try to break your agenda into three parts: accomplishments, on-going activities and issues you need assistance. Keep it in an active approach rather than passive one. When you present issues, prioritize them by order of importance, and list everything on the agenda you need to discuss. Bring any needed backup documentation to refer to if needed. Be sure to take notes on your agenda & file it for future reference. This is particularly important if you have contested decisions.

3. Keep a pulse on your boss's changing priorities. Ask your boss the following questions:

1. What's your priority today?
2. What do you need today?
3. What can I do for you?
4. What else needs to get done?
5. What problem do you need me to take care of?
6. How can I help you?

When you ask these questions, be prepared to be loaded with additional tasks, so you must also prepare to change your own task list. Remember, the boss' agenda is more important than yours.

4. Anticipate problems and offer solutions. Make sure you confirm appointments, clarify logistics of any activities and meetings. In fact, take the lead in planning the logistics, anticipate the reliability of equipment being used so that you ensure that it is working properly for any planned activities, replenish supplies before they run out and normalized predictable problems.

5. Always be prepared to give a status report on your projects at any time. This is your job so this should be a no-brainer. Be prepared at a moment's notice to update your boss on what you are currently working on, where you are in terms of accomplishing certain tasks and how far you've progressed on any long-range projects.

Five Key Concepts for Managing Up

1. Be on time or early for the start of your day.
 1. This gives you time to prioritize & plan
 2. Arriving ten minutes early for your workday can make a big difference
 3. Remember, Focus + Reliability + Time Management means that you are capable of handling greater responsibility
 4. Punctuality indicates professionalism, respect, reliability, and eagerness

5. Chronic lateness indicates the exact opposite
6. Give yourself time cushions so that you don't arrive late. Traffic isn't a viable excuse.
2. Be a gatekeeper and keep away unwanted time-eaters
 1. Divert them to another appropriate department
 2. Take the hit yourself & handle independently or relay the message
 3. View your role as the "office diplomat"
3. Create systems so that others can find things when you're not around
 1. This prevents frustration for those in the office looking for needed materials
 2. It avoids duplications of work
 3. It saves the time of rifling through paper and/or computer files
 4. It gives your boss the answer if he/she needs to provide one while you are unavailable
4. Keep confidential information where it belongs
 1. What you see and hear in your boss's office stays there
 2. Build a reputation as someone capable of holding sensitive information
 3. Earn the trust and confidence of your boss
 4. Unless it is illegal, immoral, or unethical, be a vault!
5. Under-promise and over-deliver
 1. Why? Most people do the opposite
 2. Unexpected delays & obstacles inevitably interfere with goal accomplishment
 3. Others may be depending on you
 4. Rule of Thumb: Projected hours X 2

Before you can really get things done, you have to really know your organization. I don't mean know it, I mean really KNOW it. You have to know your boss, your boss' boss, their peers and your peers. It is not as easy task. It takes studying, asking questions and most importantly documenting the answers. In my book, *Climbing the Corporate Ladder-Safely!*, I document the process in detail. Once you understand the interrelationships and the underpinnings, your success can escalate and you can navigate the organizational changes more easily.

Strategies Regarding the Politics of Safety and Managing Up

What follows are a few strategies that I have developed throughout my career to successfully deal with my boss without the illusion of manipulation. Actually, it is quite the opposite.

How to get the green light from your boss. Getting the green light on a project isn't as easy as it may first appear. Feel your boss out, is he/she a micro- or macro-manager? This should be easy to determine. Next understanding where he/she is management-wise, begin with a small project. Then, approach your boss at an opportune time. I don't mean convenient for you, but for him/her. If he/she is a morning person catch them early, but if he/she isn't in the office until later in the day, do it then. Opportune is not when he/she is busy, handling a crisis, on Monday AM, in a bad mood. Wait, be patient for the right time. It often means the difference between "yes" and "no." When you do meet, show how your proposal fits in with his/her objectives. Don't paint blue skies or exaggerate. It is always best to under promise and over deliver. Do your research and be ready with the facts from the Internet, studies, journals, colleagues, similar companies. In the end, make it easy to say yes. Be ready to answer the hard questions, "What's the bottom line of this project." "When will you have it ready?" "Who will work on it?" "How many people will it take?" "How does this fit within our overall plan? If you are prepared, you have the best opportunity to get the Green light.

How to work with a boss who keeps you under his/her thumb. These bosses are domineering, autocratic and authoritarian. If you find this burdensome just remember, management changes regularly

so just be patient for the next re-organization. In the meantime, do what the U.S. Marines do, adapt and persevere so that you can relate to your boss. Take a moment and analyze why your boss behaves the way he/she does. They may have the belief that he/she had a tough time climbing up the ladder. He/she had to prove himself/herself and by golly you will too. He/she may be under pressure from above that you are not privy to. He/she may be faking it. He/she may have “Peter Principled” and is just waiting for the wrong person to figure it out and dump him/her. If you get abused verbally, roll with the punches. Don’t take it personally, take it professionally. Follow a diplomatic course. Rather than wimping and groveling or picking fights take a more judicious middle course. Be strategic. Pick your battles carefully and fight them to win. Don’t waste time on skirmishes and stay your distance. View this kind of boss as a learning experience. I’ve learned many of the things I would never do as a boss from this type of boss. They are critics and they can be your best teacher. In the end, your goal is to simply, outlive them.

When and when not to go over your boss’ head or the proverbial end run. Going over your boss’ head is like defusing a bomb. It must be done very, VERY Carefully. You always have a choice but the consequences can be very dangerous. In some companies the culture dictates that it is okay, while in others it is strictly verboten. Be careful not to commit political suicide here. This is why you need to know your corporate culture. Work every angle as hard as you can before you attempt to go over your boss’ head. The bottom line is that it is a last resort. There are five tactics I’ve used to avoid an end run: (1) Break it up into small pieces; (2) Ease your boss into acceptance; (3) Offer to help your boss; (4) Your boss is busy, help him/her out; and (5) Keep your boss informed.

Building support networks. Politics is a game you are playing to get ahead on charm and who you know. Political savvy is one area to excel. Political skill with competency should be used with respect. As a result, building a network is imperative. No, building networks is crucial. You need to extend yourself socially. There at least two steps: First, give credit to employees for their achievements because it is good politics. Examples include showcasing employees in Newsletters, notes, letters to file, etc. Secondly, seek to credit yourself diplomatically, as this amplifies what you have done well.

How to be informed of organizational changes. You need prior knowledge before significant events happen, both good and bad news. You need to be tapped into the formal system. Hopefully you are already included in meetings, memos, announcements, etc. But don’t leave out the informal system which is often equally important. This includes gossip, chance encounters in the hallways, rumors, etc. Tap into the informal system. Have you heard anything about the re-org? Take the straightforward and direct approach. I have a feeling there will be another layoff, what have you heard? They may or may not tell you. In the end, this will help you survive. Lastly, don’t overlook your employees. They are your eyes and ears in the field. Ask them and use them as a valuable information source.

So, there you have it, the tip of the iceberg, managing up and the politics of safety. It is a daunting task. Before you can really get things done, you have to really know your organization. Once you do, I think the points provided here will help you develop your roadmap and strategy for dealing with your boss and the politics revolving around this issue.

Parting Thoughts

As you take this information and try to implement a few things in your workplace below are a few do’s and don’ts:

- DO remember that managers are not perfect;
- DON’T complain – manage up;
- DO set meetings & agendas;

- DON'T lose track of your boss's priorities; and
- DO anticipate problems & offer solutions.

References

Hansen, Mark D., 2011. *Climbing the Corporate Ladder-Safely!* Des Plaines, IL: American Society of Safety Engineers.

Hansen, Mark D. 2010. *Out of the Box, More, Skills for Developing Your Own Career Path.* Des Plaines, IL: American Society of Safety Engineers.