

Managing Your Boss

By

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While the title does elicit a few giggles and shakes of the head, the reality is that you have a relationship with your boss. You need to manage that relationship – just as you do with any relationship – if you want to be successful. The authors break the topic down in to three main areas: (i) understanding your boss, (ii) understanding yourself and (iii) developing and managing the relationship. This same framework can be used in your interactions with others personally and professionally. The simplicity of the framework should not be underestimated – there is a reason that an article published in 1979 has been republished multiple times and is included in the Harvard Business Review classic collection.

Understanding Your Boss can be broken down in to four steps:

- Understanding his or her goals and objectives. This is important to make sure that your goals are properly aligned.
- Understanding the pressures that he/she faces. This provides you with perspectives on what is/is not currently “hot”.
- Understanding his/her strengths, weaknesses, and blind spots. He/she is a person and all of us have these.
- Understanding his/her preferred work style. While you may not like their style, as the boss they make the rules and dictate how the game is played.

Understanding Yourself can be broken down in to three steps:

- Understanding your strengths and weaknesses. Self-awareness is critical in any relationship.
- Understanding your preferred personal style. If this aligns with your boss, great. If not, you need to be aware of this disconnect and adjust accordingly.
- Understanding your predisposition towards dependence on authority figures:
 - Are you prone to “counterdependence”? By this the authors are referring to the situation where you are at odds with / feel constrained by your boss.
 - Are you prone to “overdependence”? By this the authors are referring to the situation where you are predisposed to acquiesce weakly to all of your bosses instructions
 - Neither counterdependence nor overdependence is productive state and you need to take care to avoid falling in to either trap.

Developing and Managing the Relationship can be broken down to five steps:

- Developing a work style that fits both your needs. However, you need to accept that the style may more closely mirror the boss’ preference versus yours.

- Establishing a set of mutual expectations. Clearly defined expectations are the cornerstone to any relationship.
- Keeping your boss informed at all times. Your boss NEEDS the information that you have. The challenge is to make sure that you provide the proper level of information. Neither too much nor too little. Keep in mind that “too much” or “too little” is entirely dependent on the boss.
- Focusing on dependability and honesty at all points in time. If you behave in a predictable manner and always act with integrity the trust between you and your boss will grow steadily over time.
- Selectively using your boss’ time and resources. There is nothing more disruptive to a boss than a “needy” employee. Recognizing that your boss’ time is valuable and limiting interactions to only those that are necessary – by the boss’ definition of necessary – will demonstrate that you appreciate the time challenges that your boss faces.

The interesting thing about Gabarro and Kotter’s article is that it is intuitive and easily actionable. It’s for these two reasons that it is one of the HBR classics. A copy of the article can be found [here](#).

It is well worth your time to review these principles and put them in action. Doing so will result in a better understanding of yourself, your boss, and your relationship with your boss. In addition, by applying these same principles to other relationships you will greatly improve your effectiveness.