

Managing & Organising Above

Most executives spend their entire career with someone they must report to. Even CEOs must "manage up" to their boards and shareholders. The ability to manage these relationships are decisive for executive success.

Given the importance of managing uplines, executives should pay as much attention to it as they do to managing their own staff.

Onesto

Tom Jamieson, COO, oNesto

"Executives who can effectively focus on others emerge as natural leaders regardless of organizational or social rank."

DANIEL GOLEMAN,
RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

A topic often discussed by executives is their ability to “manage or influence up” in an organization. It is often referenced indirectly, but employees at all levels struggle in their quest to influence or win over the people who work above them.

In situations where executives deal with Executive Leadership Teams, CEOs, or boards, this skill is more important, because these relationships up the organization are the source of many senior executive problems.

Interestingly, articles on “managing up” are outnumbered by articles on “managing down” by orders of magnitude. Books on the subject are sparse whereas books on leadership are inexhaustible.

In fact the term “managing up” is almost non-existent in executive vernacular. It shouldn't be.

Managing the needs and expectations of an executive's upline should carry the same weight as managing one's downline reports. But business attitudes dislike the idea of being a follower - it is hard to think of the word “follower” (at least in a Western business context) in a wholly positive context.

The truth is, however, that anyone other than a CEO spends much of their working life following someone. And CEOs are beholden to their boards, and board members are to shareholder constituents.

Some of the Silicon Valley uber-CEOs, Gates, Jobs, Musk, Zuckerberg and Bezos were leaders from the time they were at university. They are also the rarest of creatures.

The CEOs of most Fortune 500 and ASX 100 companies spent their careers climbing the ranks of organisations they come to lead. In a 40-year career, an executive might spend 4 years in a CEO role. The first 90% of their career is as a follower. And as more than 99% of executives never become CEOs, it is a wonder that more time and resources aren't spent talking about and training employees to manage those above them.

The Western world has a lopsided fixation in leadership. It's part of our cultural and sociological narrative and identity. Few want to think of themselves as “followers.” Research and discussion on leadership is constant but little time is devoted to the equally important inverse of the relationship: followership.

As such, an entire hemisphere of required executive competency is largely ignored. In determining an executive's success as they move towards the apex of an organization, adaptive skills or socio-emotional competency is as important as technical competency. In many roles it is more important.

Basically, it's not enough for an executive to be good at their job, they also must be good at managing the people around them.

Why So Little Literature on “Managing Up”?

But what are the reasons for our obsession with leadership? In Western culture work is organized hierarchically and based primarily on technical ability. In Japan, by contrast, consensus decision-making coexists alongside communal hierarchy.

The answer may lie in the evolution of business in the early 20th century. In 1880 90% of Europe’s population was employed in agriculture but by 1910 US Steel became the first billion-dollar company and Ford produced half a million cars. Management and leadership theory had to develop quickly, so it borrowed from the military, the only organizations with vast structures. This hierarchical structure has persisted since then and it persisted for good reason. Top-down decision-making and information flow has been a key to maintaining order. Only recently has technology emerged that offers an alternative to this organizational structure. Global online connectivity now allows organisations to form as networks or hives. The most successful examples of this is open source software like Linux that was developed collaboratively with defined leaders.

By contrast soldiers in 19th and early 20th century armies were organized in rigid hierarchies so that superiors could disseminate orders quickly and effectively. In the First World War particularly, where soldiers were considered expendable, and orders often sent them to certain death, it follows that we have learned to equate followership with powerlessness, passivity, submissiveness and a lack of agency.

In Japan, by contrast, followership is a cultural necessity that forms part of the social contract between the country, its corporations, and its citizens.

Mitch Prinstein, the professor of psychology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill conducted research that showed Japan and China regard community values more than individual status. Where individualism is more prevalent than communitarianism, however, hierarchical social status becomes increasingly important. It affects the release of serotonin, a neurochemical associated with happiness.

High social status is intricately connected to prestige at work. Hence the West’s focus on leadership – we’re wired to feel good in leadership positions.

Focus on following to become the leader

If we can, however, reframe followership from a “power construct” into a “relational construct”, we can reconceptualize followership as a source of choice. We can take a pragmatic view on why we should consider upline relationships with due deliberation and move beyond the idea that “managing up” is merely the contemptuous pursuit of flattering superiors.

Observationally (and perhaps ironically), the best leaders are executives who manage above successfully. Rarely, however, do executives actively talk about the strategies they employ to manage people higher up the organisation. They do, however, talk readily about how they manage their direct reports and teams.

When prodded with questions however, or in talking to their superiors, the successful strategies they deploy in managing those above begin to emerge. These strategies and tactics are not often conscious, nor are they thought through.

They should be, in equal measure to the strategies used to manage down the organisation. This is counter-intuitive in the Western notion of downward propagation of power and information. We expect our bosses to be self-sufficient and we adopt a passive “parent-child” notion of the relationship, where the superiors manage the needs and directions of the people below them.

The most successful executives actively participate in this relationship, as outlined below.

Promotions Based on Technical Competence Leading to Bad Bosses

Most organizations still promote people based primarily on their technical success rather than for management or people skills. Technical skills are easier to measure and seem more meritocratic than leadership skills which are subjective and prone to opinion. Empirical evidence from our executive coaching practice indicates, however, that those with high socio-emotional skills are substantially more effective at the upper reaches of organisations.

To compound the problem, many new managers receive little or no training before stepping into their new roles. The result is sub-optimal bosses. One study showed the depth of the problem this causes: 65% of workers surveyed would choose a new boss over a pay raise.

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Ideally, organisations should place more consideration on the adaptive skills of potential managers and then train their new leaders. Ideally.

Almost managers and bosses have weaknesses and flaws. Executives working for them have two alternatives:

1. the futile search for the perfect boss, or
2. a decision to work better with the boss they have.

John Gabarro and John Kotter, professors in management at the Harvard Business School penned a classic article “Managing Your Boss” in 2005. All executives should read this article as essential to their executive development.

Gabarro and Kotter’s ideas forms the basis for this article.

Effective Executives Manage Their Bosses

Some of the executives we talked to for this paper lamented that on top of their other duties, we were suggesting that they must manage their relationships with their bosses. A common response was that the management of the relationship should be their superior’s job. Ideally, maybe, but work is never ideal or perfect.

Effective executives, in fact, spend considerable effort managing their relationship with their boss. They view themselves as responsible for what they achieve in an organization. They don't leave their career to the whim of superiors, let alone the vagaries of a large organisation. The process of consciously working with a superior to obtain the best possible results for the employee, their boss, and the company, strengthens agency – and effective executives take responsibility for their own careers.

Managing the relationships with bosses simplifies jobs and eliminates potentially severe problems.

Misreading the Relationship: Codependence, Information, Unrealistic Expectations & Imagined Intent

Many executives who actively and effectively supervise their own subordinates assume a passive and reactive stance to their bosses. This almost always hurts them and their companies.

Worse, friction is often rationalized by the executive as a personality conflict. While some people are psychologically or temperamentally incapable of working together, often, a personality conflict is only a part of the problem, and sometimes a very small part.

Rather, executives often have unrealistic assumptions and expectations about the nature of boss–subordinate relationships. They fail to recognize that this relationship involves mutual dependence between two fallible human beings.

They believe that their bosses are not dependent on them and fail to see how much the boss needs the executive's help and cooperation to do their own job effectively. These don't see that the boss can be severely hurt by their actions, and needs cooperation, dependability and honesty from their subordinates.

Other executives don't see themselves as very dependent on their bosses. They gloss over how much help and information they need from their boss in order to perform their own jobs well. This superficial view is particularly damaging when a manager's job and decisions affect other parts of the organization

Further, many executives assume that their boss magically knows what information or help their subordinates need and provides it to them. Some bosses are excellent in this respect, but for an executive to expect that from all bosses is dangerously unrealistic. A more reasonable expectation is that modest help and information flow will be forthcoming.

Effective executives accept this fact and assume primary responsibility for their own careers and development. They make a point of seeking the information and help they need to do a job rather than wait for their bosses to provide it.

Managing mutual dependence requires the following:

1. A good understanding of the other person and themselves, especially regarding strengths, weaknesses, work styles, and needs.
2. The executive uses this information to develop and manage a healthy working relationship that is compatible with both people's work styles and strengths, and is characterized by mutual expectations that meet the most critical needs of the other person.

Many executives also mistakenly attribute their bosses' actions to incompetence or malice. As we coach up and down organizations we get to see the real basis for decisions of an executive's boss. They are often based on corporate objectives over which their subordinate has no visibility.

For example, a senior marketing manager was convinced her boss was willfully blocking an initiative that she'd devised and was passionate about. She was sure her boss didn't like her. What we knew was that the boss was privy to the divestment of a business over which the initiative was planned. The divestment was completely confidential and couldn't be socialized down the business. Further, the boss was our client's greatest advocate and unbeknownst to her had actively campaigned for her last promotion, when other executives were hesitant.

The executive made four basic errors.

1. She took information supplied to her at face value,
2. She made assumptions in areas where she had no information,
3. She never actively tried to clarify what her boss's objectives were, and
4. She didn't consider that there might be factors at work that were bigger than her role.

Managers who work effectively with their bosses do not behave this way. Rather:

1. They seek out information about the boss's goals and problems and pressures.
2. They are alert for opportunities to question the boss and others around to test their assumptions.
3. They pay attention to clues in the boss's behavior.
4. They don't scorn the boss due to their own (real or not) intellectual superiority.
5. They don't assume that decisions and actions taken by the boss that affect them are confined to them. They try to look for the greater "why" in the decisions.
6. They don't infer negative intent – or positive intent – in their boss's decisions.

This is imperative when executives begin working with a new boss, but effective managers also do this on an ongoing basis because they recognize that priorities and concerns change.

Understanding Your Boss

Managing your boss requires an understanding of the boss and his or her context, as well as your own situation. Most executives do this to a degree, but many are not thorough or thoughtful enough in analyzing this landscape.

At a minimum, appreciate your boss's:

- goals and pressures,
- strengths and weaknesses,
- organizational and personal objectives,
- their pressures, especially those from their own boss and others at the same level,
- preferences and blind spots,
- personal situations, particularly any significant disruptions like a broken-down relationship,
- preferred style of working,
- preference for information (memos, formal meetings, or phone calls),
- capacity for conflict (do they thrive on it or try to minimize it?),
- preference for control (do they delegate and leave you or constantly need detail?)

Without this information an executive is flying blind when dealing with their boss. Unnecessary conflicts, misunderstandings, and problems are inevitable.

Understanding Yourself

The boss, however, is only one-half of the relationship. The employee is the other half, as well as the part over which he, she or they has direct control. Developing an effective working relationship requires, then, that the employee knows their own needs, strengths and weaknesses, and personal style.

Executives rarely change their basic personality and they won't change the personality of their boss. But they can become aware of what it is about them that impedes or facilitates working with their boss and use that awareness take actions to make the relationship more effective.

Although a superior–subordinate relationship displays mutual dependence, the subordinate is typically more dependent on the boss than the other way around. This dependence often results in the subordinate feeling a degree of frustration and sometimes anger when actions or options are constrained by their boss's decisions. This is a normal part of life and occurs in the best of relationships. The way in which an executive handles these frustrations largely depends on their predisposition toward dependence on authority figures.

Some executives instinctively react and resent the boss's authority and rebel against their boss's decisions. This can escalate a conflict beyond what is appropriate and cause the executive to misguidedly see the boss almost as an institutional enemy. This can conflate – without conscious awareness – into a fight with the boss just for the sake of fighting. Reactions to being constrained can become strong and sometimes impulsive. The boss begins to be seen as someone who, by virtue of the role, a hindrance to progress, and an obstacle to be circumvented or at best tolerated.

Psychologists call this pattern of reactions “counterdependent” behavior. Although a counterdependent person is difficult for most superiors to manage and usually has a history of strained relationships with superiors, this sort of manager is apt to have even more trouble with a boss who tends to be directive or authoritarian.

When the executive acts on their negative feelings – often in subtle and nonverbal ways – the boss sometimes does become the enemy.

Sensing the subordinate's latent hostility, the boss will lose trust in the subordinate and subsequently demand more control, behave less openly, and lose respect for their subordinate's judgment.

Paradoxically, an executive with this type of predisposition is often a good manager of their own people. They will often go out of their way to get support for their reports and will not hesitate to go in and bat for them.

At the other extreme are executives who suppress their anger and behave compliantly even when poor decisions are pending. They will agree with the boss even when disagreement is welcomed or a decision would be easily altered if more information was provided.

Both counter-dependence and overdependence lead managers to hold unrealistic views of what a boss is. Both views ignore that bosses, like everyone else, are imperfect and fallible. They lack time, encyclopedic knowledge, or extrasensory perception; nor are they evil enemies. They have their own pressures and concerns that are sometimes at odds with the wishes of their subordinates. Often there are good reasons for this that are invisible to the people below them.

Altering a predisposition toward authority – especially at the extremes – is difficult without intensive effort. Vigorous self-assessment helps. If an executive tends toward counterdependence, they can understand and even predict what their reactions are likely to be. If they tend towards overdependence, they might question the extent to which their overcompliance may be making both them and their boss less effective.

Employees seeking to maximise their effectiveness at work should read generally on how brain operates in work environments in order to gain more self-awareness.

Our white paper on “Neuroscience At Work” gives an overview of this idea.

Developing and Managing the Relationship

With a clear understanding of both you and your boss, you can usually establish a way of working together that fits both of you; is characterized by unambiguous mutual expectations; and that helps you both be more productive and effective.

A good working relationship with a boss must accommodate differences in work style. Subordinates can adjust their styles in response to their boss's preferred method for receiving information. Harvard's Peter Drucker divided bosses into "listeners" and "readers." Some bosses like to get information in report form so they can read and study it. Others work better with information and reports presented in person so they can ask questions. As Drucker points out, the implications are obvious. If your boss is a listener, you brief him or her in person, then follow it up with a memo. If your boss is a reader, you cover important items or proposals in a memo or report, then discuss them.

Other adjustments can be made according to a boss's decision-making style. Some bosses prefer to be involved in decisions and problems as they arise. These are high-involvement managers who like to keep their hands on the pulse of the operation. Usually their needs (and your own) are best satisfied if you touch base with them on an ad hoc basis. A boss who has a need to be involved will become involved one way or another, so there are advantages to including him or her at your initiative. Other bosses prefer to delegate and want to be involved. They expect you to come to them with major problems and inform them about any important changes.

Respecting the Office

Executives should also pay a level of respect to the office someone holds rather than the person in that office. This "depersonalizing" of the relationship with their boss can help remove any acidity created from emotional or personality conflict. It also allows for a more dispassionate perspective.

The CFO, CMO, CTO or GM is part of the organisation's structure. Whilst it seems so obvious to say, it is not the subordinate's role to resist or dismantle a boss's decisions, nor should a subordinate intentionally white-ant their boss's programs.

Organisations have structures for a reason. The key management structure decrees that decisions made a higher-level supersede decisions made below.

Executives who play underhanded games against their superiors rarely fare well. Ultimately their peers and reports stop trusting them and their own leadership and reputation suffers. Ironically, this behavior often causes the subordinates responsible to blame their boss for their depleted status.

Executives should carefully check their thinking and behavior when they disagree with a course of action or direction taken by a superior.

In intentionally – or unintentionally – undermining a boss executives often undermine themselves.

Mutual Expectations

Executives shouldn't assume they know what their boss expect. Some superiors spell out their expectations explicitly and in detail, but most do not. And although many corporations have systems that provide a basis for communicating expectations (such as formal planning processes, career planning reviews, and performance appraisal reviews), these systems never work perfectly.

Ultimately, the burden falls on the subordinate to find out what their boss's expectations are. They can be both broad such as what kinds of problems the boss wishes to be informed about and when, as well as specific, such as when a project should be completed and the information required in the interim.

Bosses who don't explicitly express expectations are common. Effective executives find ways to get information. Some will draft a detailed memo covering key aspects of their work and send it to their boss for approval. They follow up with a face-to-face discussion to go over each item in the memo. A discussion like this will often surface virtually all the boss's expectations.

A Flow of Information

How much information a boss needs about what a subordinate is doing will vary significantly depending on the boss's style, the situation he or she is in, and the confidence the boss has in the subordinate. But it is not uncommon for a boss to need more information than the subordinate would naturally supply or for the subordinate to think the boss knows more than they really do. Effective executives recognize that they probably underestimate what their bosses need to know and make sure they find ways to keep them informed through processes that fit their styles.

Managing the flow of information upward is particularly difficult if the boss does not like to hear about problems. Although many people would deny it, bosses often give off signals that they want to hear only good news. They show great displeasure—usually nonverbally—when someone tells them about a problem.

Nevertheless, for the good of the organization, the boss, and the subordinate, superiors need to hear about failures as well as successes. Some subordinates deal with a good-news-only boss by finding indirect ways to get the necessary information to them.

Dependability and Honesty

Few things are more disabling to a boss than a subordinate on whom he cannot depend, whose work they cannot trust. Almost no one is intentionally undependable, but many managers are inadvertently so because of oversight or uncertainty about their boss's priorities.

Most executives aren't intentionally dishonest with their bosses. But it is easy to shade the truth and play down issues. Current concerns often become future surprise problems. It's almost impossible for bosses to work effectively if they cannot rely on an accurate reading from their subordinates. Because it undermines credibility, dishonesty is perhaps the most troubling trait a subordinate can have. Without a basic level of trust, a boss feels compelled to check a subordinate's decisions, which makes it difficult to delegate.

Most disabling to a boss is where a subordinate undermines their boss, as discussed above. Most executives are astute and have an antenna for negative behavior. Even the vaguest suspicion that they are being undermined will suspend a boss's trust in a subordinate.

If proof is found for the suspected behavior, the subordinate can expect abrupt termination or redeployment.

Good Use of Time and Resources

Your boss is probably as limited in his or her store of time, energy, and influence as you are. Every request you make of your boss uses up some of these resources, so it's wise to draw on these resources selectively. This may sound obvious, but many managers use up their boss's time (and some of their own credibility) over relatively trivial issues.

Followers who create followers in their leaders

When we interview executives in their role as both leaders and followers, a key trait that stands out amongst the most effective is the relationship they had with the people around them: up the organisation, down the organisation, and at their peer level.

The best executives create followers in their leaders. They understand what their leaders need and then go about providing that for them. Their leaders, who appreciate the "uncanny" ability of these executives to get the right work done in the right way, become advocates for their staff and then promote them through the organisation. These leaders now "follow" the career path of the best executives with whom they have worked. They actively support, promote and recommend the executive's rise through the organisation or beyond it.

At the very least they give effusive references for the executives that reference checkers know are genuine.

And these executives get more done because they have learned the key to influence: It involves relationships as much as it does with technical skill. At executive levels there is much less difference in intellect and technical proficiency as there is in relationship management aptitude.

Those who are socially astute and manage relationships well are the ones who are most often promoted, particularly when technical skills are similar between candidates aiming to advance.

Some people manage relationships naturally and understand the needs of the people around them without conscious thought. In a work context this shouldn't be confused with popularity. It is not necessarily something people "naturally" do or don't have.

The dynamics of work relationships can be improved with concentration and scrutiny. Concerted effort should be applied to understanding the relationships around us at work – and the most important of these is with your boss.

If an employee can't win the respect and adherence of the people above, then their path to the top of the organisation is steep and sodden with deep mud.

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oNesto is a suite of tools and learning that helps employees build savings without personal contributions; provides access to earned wages in emergencies; a financial learning platform and a digital employee benefits solution.

oNesto stretches employee income by providing discounts at 65 major retailers – effectively increasing wages to lower income workers by 5% after tax. It restructures the cadence of wage payments to better match employee needs, and provides learning and skills to improve employee performance at work, whilst simultaneously improving employee engagement, culture and recognition.

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