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“Managing up” – Skill or Art?

It happens every day at any toy store. The little brat is running around, grabbing toys, whining and begging mom or dad to buy this or that and everything else. Can you picture this scene? The responsible parent will stick to his/her budget, will not be afraid to say no, but will work on the relationship and the emotional development of the little angel. The bad parent? Well, I’m sure you know it’s easier to just charge another toy on your credit card.....

Although we’re sure that most of you can relate to this story we are even more certain that by now you must be asking yourselves: what’s the connection with managing up? Everything.

Most of us are not skilled enough in the art of managing up. We confuse managing up with playing politics. Worse, we become “yes men.” And because of this and other misconceptions, we end up behaving like the brat at the toy store. We whine. We complain. We demand. As if we were entitled.

Recently in a class, we heard the following comment from a participant: “I do not have to love my boss, I already have a husband.” After we all laughed, of course, there was some realization of the seriousness of the comment. Most of us want to have a perfect relationship with our boss. Guess what? It isn’t going to happen. The late management guru Peter Drucker once said, *“You don’t have to like or admire your boss, nor do you have to hate him. You do have to manage him, however, so that he becomes your resource for achievement, accomplishment and personal success.”*

Okay, if we had read Drucker at the beginning of our careers, chances are we would have more realistic expectations. But the million dollar question still remains. What do I do to manage this person? The following are some of our recommendations, not necessarily listed in order of importance:

1) Don’t whine

Yes, perhaps you have been with the company for 20 years, and your salary is not competitive with the market, yeah, yeah, yeah, but whining is not going to make your boss more supportive of your position. Actually, that is the last thing s/he wants to hear. There is nothing wrong about having a professional discussion concerning compensation, inadequate resources, or other issues. The problem is how it’s done.

2) Present your ideas and recommendations in a menu, the more alternatives the better.

Bosses like to have options, to make decisions. Connect your ideas and recommendations to your boss’s goals. Make a visual statement of how they will contribute to the overall goal. This brings us to the next point.

3) Make sure to understand where your boss is coming from.

Who is this person? What are his personal and professional goals? What are her drivers and ambitions? What is his style? What kind of pressure is she under? As you can imagine, your boss is under much more pressure than you are. As they say “it’s lonely at the top.”

4) Make a difference

You are not the only person reporting to your boss. Your crisis represents only a small portion of his/her headaches. So, why does s/he have to listen to you right now? Make your case, in an objective and concise way (and always remember rule number one: don’t whine).

5) Work hard on the trust and credibility issues

Make your boss trust you. The first thing that comes to mind is delivering a great performance. Exceed your goals. Show that you care. Demonstrate an institutional mind and be sure to always see the big picture. Nothing creates more trust than bringing bad news as close as possible to the event. Don’t wait, as it will only get worse. Of course, don’t forget rule



number 2 (have some alternatives ready for your boss to digest...)

6) Don't fight your boss

If he wants you to write a white paper, do it. If she prefers data presented in 200 excel sheets, do it. If he wants just a snapshot of the idea, learn how to be concise and throw away your 2 inch thick report. Learn what works (and what doesn't) with the most important relationship you have at work. S/he is neither a parent nor the devil to be fought at all costs. The ultimate goal is to create a productive partnership.

See you next month. Suggestions are welcome.

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