

On Managing Your Boss Managing Your Own Talent

Great bosses are still in a minority. Few employees work for an excellent line manager/boss, the individual who is able to balance empathetic warmth with drive, support with authority; a leader who has the personal awareness to manage followers/reports, accept all the inevitable imperfections while motivating them to strive to develop; a leader who knows how to engage and energize team members even at the most challenging of times.

Most of us work for a 'work in progress'; a line manager who may genuinely want to get it right and excel, but who is still struggling to put this into practice. Perhaps too much time is spent telling people what to do and not enough time listening to the unique needs, or indeed, ideas, of each person. Maybe your boss wants people in his/her own image; learning his/her way of doing things. Maybe you report to someone who naively treats every one the way he/she would like to be treated. Maybe you have a well intentioned boss but one who is too busy to find the time to talk with reports about their performance. Or maybe he/she is less well intentioned. Indeed, perhaps you have a boss who dislikes people -distrusts them - takes credit for their success, and blames them for his/her failures!

What are you going to do about it? Five actions to consider?

One

If your line manager is just too busy to talk with you about your performance or your goals... schedule a performance planning meeting with him/her. Remove the planning burden by telling your boss that you will provide the structure for the meeting in advance so that the time together is spent most efficiently and effectively. Offer to prepare a short review of the last three months, the action you took, the discoveries you made, the new partnerships you built.... Be clear that you will then want to discuss the next three months—focusing your key challenges, the new discoveries you want to make, and the new relationships you want to build. In short, your message is that all the boss has to do is to attend the meeting and focus on you, the report, for 45 minutes.

If the scheduled meeting gets consistently cancelled or your manager has nothing to say to you during the meeting, then your problem is not that he/she is too busy. Your problem is probably that the boss is a poor manager. Faced with this problem, you will need to consider how to use questions to create an awareness of your expectations of a developmental focus in a boss.

Two

If your manager expects you to do things his/her way ... then, the chances are your boss is stuck on process. Choose your moment, perhaps during your performance planning meeting, and encourage your boss to consider defining your role more by its outcomes than by its steps. Ask what outcome would be most useful to measure your success. As you discuss this, describe for him/her how your style, although different from his/hers, will nevertheless enable you to achieve the outcomes expected of you. Your point here is not to persuade that your style is better than that of your boss, but rather it is the most effective way for you to reach the outcomes that have been agreed. When viewed through this lens, the issue of style preference difference becomes more acceptable.

This said, a mis-focus on steps rather than outcomes may not be the problem. Indeed, your boss may be forcing you to do things in his/her image out of power and control motivation. If you can accommodate his/her style without compromising your integrity, then, fine; otherwise you may need to consider your options.

Three

If your manager praises you inappropriately or at inappropriate times, you can suggest alternatives. This isn't always an easy conversation. In fact, telling your manager that you much prefer to be praised in private rather than in public, can sometimes feel arrogant and presumptuous. Once again, you have to pick your moment. It would probably neither wise nor sensitive to correct the behaviour immediately after he/she had the whole team stand up and acknowledge your success. Instead make your comments at a time when you are discussing all aspects of your performance, perhaps during the structured, dispassionate setting of a performance planning meeting. (it might be good to graciously recognise his/her good intentions). This will indicate that you have thought carefully about what you need from your boss and will offer the chance to blend what you have shared into the way he/she 'manages' you.

If the problem is less around the wrong kind of reinforcement and positive reinforcement, but more about no praise at all, you will need to survive for as long as possible on your own reserves. If you are an instinctive self starter, you may find that you can survive adequately for quite a while without any recognition at all. Most people, though, will soon feel a drain on their energy. Faced with the prospect of a recognition-less environment, a move might be the best option.

Four

If your manager consistently asks you questions about how you are doing and feeling, or otherwise intrudes Suggest that you don't find this helpful. It is a delicate matter because you don't want to seem insubordinate but negotiate 'checking in' less frequently than he/she obviously wants to check in with you. Be clear that it is no reflection on him/her but that you are looking for more autonomy, and that if you can schedule 'check-in' meetings on your cycle you feel you will be a great deal more productive. Sensitive as this situation is, if you use unambiguous, unemotional terminology you should be able to manage the issue and come to some practical arrangements that work for both of you. If your manager is intruding as a result of mistrust, the most unambiguous, unemotional terminology will be of little impact. You will have to resort to a quite different strategy – a move.

Five

If your manager consistently ignores you, distrusts you, takes credit for your work, blames you for all mistakes, or disrespects you ... then you need to get out from under him/her. You might decide to set a timeline of six months in an effort to resolve the situation; perhaps lobby key decision-makers, seek a strategy to approach your manager's boss or consult with human resources. If the behaviour has been consistent over time, your boss is unlikely to change significantly without a planned development intervention. The problem might be a function of lack of self-awareness, low self-esteem, denial, or worse. Mental re-programming may be required, without which, a boss who exhibits negative attitudes and behaviours will forever instruct, overshadow, abandon, intrude, and stifle.

It may well take a coaching intervention around EI to develop the strengths, take ownership of the challenges and develop the self-esteem, and the security necessary for effective management and leadership

It is tempting to suggest you rely on the strength of your own talent to move forward.

But we cannot. You may well manage the situation short-term perhaps in the hope that the manager will prove his own undoing and be moved on. But, lacking a good manager you will not prosper. To turn all of your talents into performance, your immediate manager is a critical partner; indeed, research shows that a professional's line manager is the one most important factor in job performance. If you are aligned with a truly dysfunctional boss, then you will never achieve your best, your potential. No matter how much you enjoy the job itself, it might well be best to move on. You deserve better.

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