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HBR IN BRIEF

Managing Your Boss

Key ideas from the [Harvard Business Review](#) article by [John J. Gabarro](#) and [John P. Kotter](#)

THE IDEA

Managing our *bosses*? Isn't that merely manipulation? Corporate cozying up? Out-and-out apple polishing? In fact, we manage our bosses for very good reasons: to get resources to do the best job, not only for ourselves, but for our bosses and our companies as well. We actively pursue a healthy and productive working relationship based on mutual respect and understanding—understanding our own and our bosses' strengths, weaknesses, goals, work styles, and needs. Here's what can happen when we don't:

Example: A new president with a formal work style replaced someone who'd been looser, more intuitive. The new president preferred written reports and structured meetings. One of his managers found this too controlling. He seldom sent background information, and was often blindsided by unanticipated questions. His boss found their meetings inefficient and frustrating. The manager had to resign.

In contrast, here's how another manager's sensitivity to this same boss's style really paid off:

Example: This manager identified the kinds and frequency of information the president wanted. He sent ahead background reports and discussion agendas. The result? Highly productive meetings and even more innovative problem solving than with his previous boss.

Managers often don't realize how much their bosses depend on them. They need cooperation, reliability, and honesty from their direct reports. Many managers also don't realize how much *they* depend on their bosses—for links to the rest of the organization, for setting priorities, and for obtaining critical resources.

Recognizing this mutual dependence, effective managers seek out information about the boss's concerns and are sensitive to his work style. They also understand how their own attitudes toward authority can sabotage the relationship. Some see the boss as the enemy and fight him at every turn; others are overly compliant, viewing the boss as an all-wise parent.

THE IDEA IN PRACTICE

You can benefit from this mutual dependence and develop a very productive relationship with your boss by focusing on:

- **compatible work styles.** Bosses process information differently. “Listeners” prefer to be briefed in person so they can ask questions. “Readers” want to process written information first, and then meet to discuss. Decision-making styles also vary. Some bosses are highly involved. Touch base with them frequently. Others prefer to delegate. Inform them about important decisions you’ve already made.
- **mutual expectations.** Don’t passively assume you know what the boss expects. Find out. With some bosses, write detailed outlines of your work for their approval. With others, carefully planned discussions are key. Also, communicate *your* expectations to find out if they are realistic. Persuade the boss to accept the most important ones.
- **information flow.** Managers typically underestimate what their bosses need to know—and what they *do* know. Keep the boss informed through processes that fit his style. Be forthright about both good and bad news.
- **dependability and honesty.** Trustworthy subordinates only make promises they can keep and don’t shade the truth or play down difficult issues.
- **good use of time and resources.** Don’t waste your boss’s time with trivial issues. Selectively draw on his time and resources to meet the most important goals—yours, his, and the company’s.

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