

Business topics



Creating an effective working relationship with those who are above us in the chain of command can seem a difficult if not daunting task for many, but it is critical to ensuring role success and job satisfaction.

Managing Up The Chain Of Command

Much has been written in recent years about the power of leadership. Mantras extolling the virtues of shunning 'management' and embracing 'leadership' have dominated. These urge those at the helm to adopt a strategic mindset and think about principles, values, and visions that will capture market opportunities and guide their businesses into the future.

Indeed for many, this has been an effective, outward looking, and customer-oriented strategy that has encouraged business growth. As many employees with

particularly visionary bosses would be familiar however, the more mundane aspects of management are sometimes paid scant attention by the boss-on-the-move. In such environments, it's not uncommon to hear protestations like:

- "My boss never has time to see me."
- "I'm told what we want to achieve, but the practical means and resources just aren't there."

- "My boss never gives me enough information."
- "I emailed the boss two days ago and I still haven't heard back."
- "It's either a drought or a flood in terms of workload around here."

While the boat is pointing in the right direction and has a course plotted for its voyage, it isn't going anywhere while the crew remains waiting for orders to leave port.



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Some Practical Tips For Upwards Management

Recognise that not everyone operates the same way or has the same priorities.

Try to learn what your manager's manager (or client) wants so that you can more effectively support your manager in his or her work.

Find out your manager's overall vision and what tangible actions you can take to align yourself with it.

Establish what your manager sees as the most important elements of your role.

Keep a list of the things you need to know (or *will* need to know) from your manager during the week.

Confirm it beforehand (multiple times if necessary) instead of complaining about it afterwards.

The Archway Group's Services

- **Executive Search & Selection**
- **Office Staff Recruitment**
- **Independent Reference Checking** (for those times when you don't need a full recruitment service, but want to validate the credentials of the person you have selected)
- **Career Guidance Counselling & Résumé Preparation** (suited to anyone looking to gain insight to their career 'value proposition')
- **Interviewing Skills Workshops** (to develop skills in the art of interviewing)
- **Psychological Assessments** (to support recruitment, promotion and team fit decisions)
- **Work/Life Balance Programs** (to aid talent retention and increase workplace productivity)
- **Contract Executives & Temporary Staff** (for those times when you need specialist expertise, to cover for someone who is away, or to alleviate workloads during high pressure times)
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At The Core - Reconciling Expectations

For employees to do their job effectively, they must first have an understanding of their job. While this seems a logical statement, in reality, there is often a gulf of incongruity between organisational, managerial, and employee level expectations of a particular position. At the heart of the notion of upwards management is the need for employees to uncover and understand just what it is that their manager expects from them in order that they can concord with these expectations effectively.

While organisations should ensure position descriptions and objectives are well defined, and wherever possible, transparent to others so that colleagues, reports and managers know what to expect of each other, it is important to discuss your role description with your boss so that ambiguities and emphases can be clearly articulated.

Good upwards management involves making salient those latent expectations a boss harbours - in other words, making sure you know all

those things that your boss expects that you surely knew, but never actually told you in the first place.

While at times upwards management might seem just a fancy name for 'anticipating your boss' needs', effective upwards management involves more than just hypothesizing just what *you* think you should do to make your boss' life easier - it involves taking the time to think what *your manager* would appreciate of you.

Do Unto Others?

In employee-manager relationships, differing work-styles and preferences are often cited as pet peeves. One person prefers email, the other face-to-face discussions. One prefers blunt communication, the other more diplomatic means. One has excellent attention to detail, the other is more concerned with the big picture. One prefers planning a task, the other executing it. The list goes on ...

Many dysfunctional reporting relationships stem from parties deciding that 'different' means disagreeable, dislikeable, or difficult. Each party expects to be treated as they would treat others, and accordingly treats others in the manner they would prefer to be treated themselves. What they neglect to do is actually think about how the other person would *prefer* to be treated, even if it's different to their own preferences.

Disregarding the preferences and working style of the other person can not only make for a difficult relationship, it can mean failing to capitalise on complementary strengths and opportunities for learning in the manager-employee relationship.

Recognising where you can learn from, utilise, add value, supplement and assist the other person is where good partnerships prosper.

The Archway Group's New Website

The Archway Group is pleased to announce the launch of its new website on 21st March 2008. We hope you will enjoy strolling through the pathways discovering management articles, job opportunities, career guidance tips, our services guide, links and other useful information. The site will be continually updated to ensure you have an interesting, informative and practical resource.

www.archwaygroup.com.au

Make friends with your manager's secretary or assistant - they may be a more accessible source of the information you require.

Avoid continually making a big deal over matters of little consequence - you don't want to suffer from the 'boy who cried wolf' syndrome.

Share plans and objectives. Communicate regularly.

Incorporate organisational and managerial goals into team goals.

Ask in what form your manager likes to communicate and find out what his/her work style preferences are.

How would your manager describe their leadership style? How can you work in with this style?

Some Practical Tips For Upwards Management cont.

Acknowledging the Other Person's Position

The first emotional reaction most people feel in these situations is often an understandable one - frustration. Seemingly, the boss' behaviour runs contrary to the individual employee's needs, but when we take the time to understand the boss' perspective, we come to realise that the business' commercial undertakings often dictate the priorities and objectives of the boss. Issues such as external commercial pressures, information only available at managerial level, pressure

from 'higher-ups' and strategic matters often remain hidden or non-salient to reporting employees. Just as within any facet of life, when others' motives or objectives are unknown, their behaviour can sometimes be bewildering, let alone easy to support.

In overcoming such difficulties, acknowledgement that others have different priorities is a sensible first step for both managers and employees alike. Simply

showing your understanding that another person has needs differing from your own reduces their need to assert their case or defend their behaviour. It also opens dialogue and information flow promoting mutual recognition of each other's needs, expectations and dependencies upon each other. From there you can start working out where the gaps between expectations and reality really are and what can be done about them.



Putting Upwards Management Into Action

Once employees understand their boss' priorities, work style and preferences, managing upwards becomes so much easier. All of a sudden their job goes from reacting to 'yet another difficulty' to being able to anticipate and proactively prepare for their boss' needs. Employees begin to intuitively know:

- When is the best time to see their boss
- The best medium by which to communicate with the boss
- How to anticipate their boss' needs, actions and quirks
- On what issues they should offer contribution
- What input they can provide that will be considered useful and treated as valuable
- What they will need to know later that they should ask now while their boss is available
- The criteria, standards and goals that their proposals, requests and efforts are to be measured against
- How to question or challenge the boss in the most palatable way
- ... and much more.

A simple technique that can often prove beneficial is to ask yourself what the likely outcome will be if you take a proposed course of action with your boss. If you can foresee a negative response, think again how you could adjust your own course of action to change the outcome. Too often we choose to reside in the apathy of "I knew that would happen" (and its sister-statement, "... so I didn't bother") instead of actually doing something that utilised what bosses often like to call 'initiative'.

Empowered Communication - Be Heard!

While some bosses might seem superhuman, or in rare cases even subhuman, most employees would readily acknowledge that the majority of bosses aren't mystics. Given that they're not in possession of crystal balls allowing them to ascertain each of their direct reports' needs, feelings and ideas, bosses require something else to delve into the inner psyche of their employees.

Direct observation might be a handy technique to gain insights

into employee thoughts and needs, but it only captures a snapshot of an employee's world and pales in comparison to our old organisational friend - effective communication.

We often hear of 'empowering employees', but the process of empowering employees goes beyond just the use of a buzzword. Employees who feel *responsible* for speaking up tend to be more likely to actually take the initiative to speak up (Morrison & Phelps,

1999). Hence it is important that employees understand that it is part of the expectations incumbent within their role that they communicate with their boss on issues of importance to themselves and the organisation. By the same token, when an organisation accepts employees' voicing of their requirements, ideas and concerns as a legitimate responsibility, it lends credence to the need for bosses to actually listen.

"... bosses require something else to delve into the inner psyche of their employees ... effective communication."



Influencing - Don't Beat Them, Join Them

Competing with, rather than supporting your boss can be a surefire way to win trouble. A key part of 'managing up' is being able to work in a collaborative, trusting relationship with your boss, but for various reasons adversarial and confrontational relationships sometimes develop. Good working relationships don't avoid debate or disagreement altogether, but instead utilise the extra resources inherent in a partnership to tackle multi-dimensional issues. Partnerships involve two parties, each bringing viewpoints, talents, manpower, insights and objective reasoning to the relationship ... the whole being greater than the sum of its parts.

Employees, bosses and organisations together have a responsibility to create an atmosphere in

which discussion following a disagreement is seen as an acceptable and productive exercise rather than an undesirable obstacle. By adopting a resolve to 'attack the problem, not the person', organisations can begin to alleviate the volatility that often surrounds disagreements.

When issues arise, try thinking from the perspective of you and your boss on one side of the table and the problem up on the whiteboard. From this 'side-by-side' frame of reference, employees are able to influence more adeptly without actions being construed as 'opposition'. By acting in partnership you will almost undoubtedly achieve more than coming from an adversarial perspective of pitting one person's argument for a course of action against another's.

Reference

Morrison, E.W., & Phelps, C.C. (1999). Taking Charge At Work: Extra role efforts to initiate workplace change. *Academy of Management Journal*. 42, 403-419.



VIEWPOINT

Working in recruitment, human resources and management consulting, we regularly see the fallout from dysfunctional reporting relationships. Whether it be a client needing to replace an employee, or a candidate looking for a new opportunity because they are dissatisfied with their present manager, too often we see the consequences of dislocation in the manager-employee relationship - and it can be a costly consequence.

Smart managers invite others' ideas and contributions, making use of the resources they have at hand. If you are going to surround yourself with the best talent, you may as well get the most out of what you have - employees who feel underutilised tend to feel undervalued as well, and that's when they start looking for new opportunities. With employment rates in Australia at a 30-year high, premier talent is far too valuable to lose just because an employee didn't feel comfortable communicating their thoughts, needs, ideas or feelings to their manager.

For employees, the clear messages are 'learn what works with your boss' and 'speak up'. Initiative is a commodity in demand, but many employees fail to take action because they're not sure what is permissible or desirable. It's important that employees make the effort to learn the parameters of their working relationships at the earliest instance in order to maintain a proactive stance. The benefit of doing so speaks for itself.

Organisations as a whole must also share in the encouragement of upwards management to ensure it remains more than just an idealism. Developing strong upwards management skills amongst employees fosters the growth of the general abilities required in management settings. Investing today in the ideals of upward management can reap significant benefits not just in the short term, but also by uncovering and fostering tomorrow's leaders.

The Archway Group



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