

The Importance of Managing Up

Management thinking has traditionally focused on the manager’s role in managing down. Far less time and attention have been given to how direct reports can (and should) “manage up.” Essentially, managing up means managing the relationship with your manager so that both of you can achieve your goals, as well as the organization’s. It is an active rather than passive process — you have to work at it. Being proactive epitomizes the concept.

This article addresses the issues related to managing up, providing a roadmap for direct reports, in many of the fundamentals. It also enables senior leadership and HR professionals to recognize their respective roles in facilitating this extremely important and neglected aspect of management. And they too have to manage up!

What does it take to effectively manage up? In a survey we recently conducted with our clients, respondents selected the following behaviors in order of importance to be successful in managing up:

Most important items for managing up effectively	% Selecting Item
Being proactive, demonstrating initiative	62%
Understanding manager’s style, working preferences and needs	52%
Keeping manager apprised of progress in executing tasks, projects	44%
Anticipating and facilitating resolution of problems	42%
Being open and honest	33%
Bringing solutions	33%
Being trustworthy	28%
Consistently ensuring accurate understanding of manager’s directives, requests	25%
Sharing problems (not hiding issues)	23%
Supporting manager (making him/her look good!)	21%
Being organized and timely	17%
Knowing when to get help from manager	16%
Showing empathy for manager’s role, pressures, etc.	7%

We agree. Of course there are two requisites that, in our opinion, also need to be established by direct reports before managing up can truly be successful:

- *Credibility* through demonstrated competence and delivery — on time and consistently;
- *Mutually agreed-to expectations* by both manager and direct report at an overall level in terms of performance goals and for the ongoing tasks at-hand.

Managing up also requires timely discussions with your manager. Being clear about your needs and your ability to sensitively communicate them are key. You may simply require additional tools or resources to get the job done, or there may be deeper issues. Communication about issues and potential or anticipated problems is also key. There is nothing managers like less than to be kept in the dark or uninformed. It can lead to bad decisions and potentially embarrassing moments, especially when managers are blindsided.

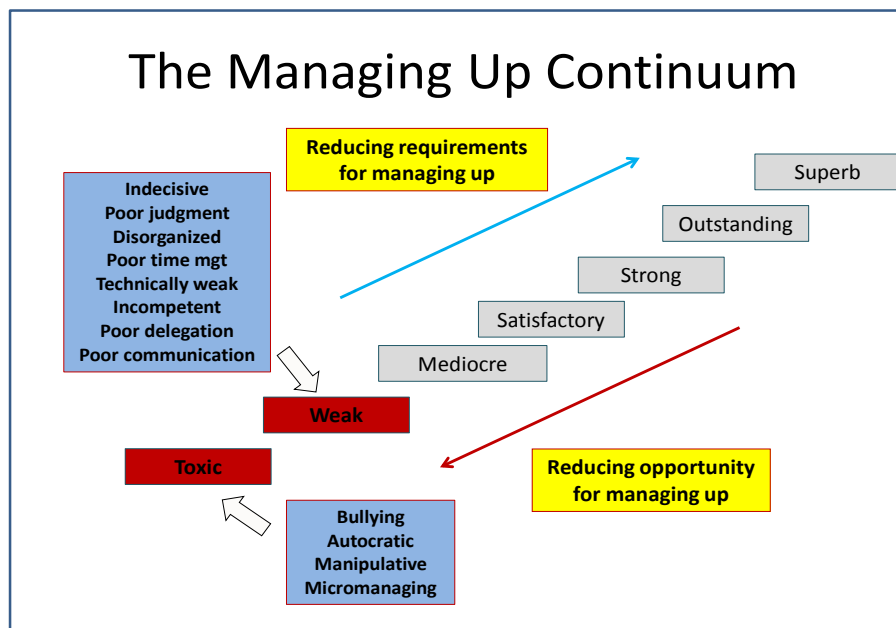
Over the years during which we've coached executives and conducted 360° reviews, employee perception surveys and leadership development programs, we've encountered managers of "all shapes and sizes." We have seen firsthand the negative effects bad management can have on performance, productivity and on people's lives. In his book "First, Break All the Rules," Marcus Buckingham mentions that, in his research conducted with Gallup, 61% of employees leave their jobs because of their managers.

When asked in the survey to rank management behaviors that, if absent or poorly demonstrated, would be most damaging to their motivation, respondents rated the following ten highest among 28 line items.

Items which, if absent or poorly demonstrated, are most damaging	% Selecting Item
Avoiding micro-managing, balancing hands-off with appropriate need to know	47%
Treating you with respect	44%
Being consistent, fair and predictable	40%
Being open and willing to listen to suggestions	29%
Leading by example (positive role model)	29%
Being trustworthy	28%
Providing positive feedback, appreciating your efforts	26%
Valuing worklife balance	22%
Creating opportunities to help you succeed	22%
Creating a productive work environment	19%

Clearly HR has a pivotal role in coaching and training managers to work more effectively with their direct reports either one-on-one or through leadership development programs to be aware of the compelling need to work at making the positive behaviors listed above an integral part of their management style.

The management continuum below shows managers at various levels in their relationship with direct reports. The better the manager, the easier it is for the direct report to manage up and the more receptive the manager to a direct report's efforts. And regrettably, this works in reverse with greater need and reducing opportunity.



What should you do if your manager is weak or, worse yet, just plain awful? The easy answer is to change jobs, but the option of transferring to another department or company is not always immediately available. The hard answer, and the one we initially advocate, is to show initiative and keep trying to manage up. Don't remain a victim of poor management. Recognize the major weaknesses of your manager and attempt to work around them.

Part of the challenge in managing up is that both strong and weak managers are frequently side-tracked with meetings, reports and other obligations and simply stretched too thin to give direct reports the time and attention they need to do their jobs effectively.

Regardless of your manager's position on the continuum, there will be times when, as direct reports, you need to push back. For example, when your manager is expecting too much, or you're not getting the coaching you need or when there's concern about a decision your manager is making. As we look to the lower end of the continuum, push back is needed when you are being treated disrespectfully, bullied or micro-managed or where you have concerns about ethical issues. If you don't speak up, the manager's behaviors and actions will undoubtedly continue. The way to push back depends entirely on the relationship you have with your manager, his or her management and behavioral style and the credibility you have built up. That said, it is generally a no-win situation when a manager is toxic. There is usually no solution and no likelihood of a significant change in behavior. In short, truly toxic managers are not coachable.

We often find employees fearful about approaching their manager on sensitive or difficult issues. They worry that they won't be heard, they'll be "yessed" to death with nothing ever happening, or there will be retribution, ranging from a lower performance rating, lower merit increases, no promotions, loss of responsibilities or even termination. It takes courage to speak up.

If you believe there may be some unpleasantness or conflict, remember to use emotional intelligence (EI). Four simple principals of EI to keep in mind in any relationship, be it business or personal, are:

- *Self regulate!* Stay cool, calm, and unemotional and work to diffuse situations where emotion blocks communication.
- *Be self-aware!* Recognize your own emotions and the impact of your behaviors or actions on your manager. At the same time, recognize your manager's emotions and when it's appropriate to have that difficult discussion.
- *Show empathy!* Recognize your manager's state of mind, pressures, problems and issues and tailor your message and your timing accordingly.
- *Use social skills!* Communicate clearly; listen and hear; influence and diffuse difficult situations.

In our opinion, helping the entire organization understand EI and how to use it is another valuable contribution HR can make.

Many of our clients have used the 4P Report as a way of getting ready for a discussion. The report is prepared beforehand and provides a summary of:

- Plans (from last meeting)
- Progress (against plans)
- Problems (what isn't working)
- Plans (action steps going forward with solutions to problems)

At the meeting, the manager reviews the 4Ps, screens out the obvious and focuses on areas that require his or her attention, problem solving, facilitation and coaching. Again, this is an accountability and communication practice which HR should encourage. The report need not be in this precise format but should certainly follow the substance of the content.

Fortunately, again with the help of HR and a host of assessment tools, many managers can enhance their management and leadership skills and move up a step or two on the continuum. As a result, their approachability, particularly on difficult or awkward issues, typically becomes progressively easier.

Finally, for managing up to succeed in an organization, the message must come from the top that it's cool to manage up. This starts with the CEO, moving to the next layer of management and generally with guidance and input from HR. Once it's accepted, managers will recognize that these proactive efforts serve to create win/win situations. The result will be that both managers and direct reports will be more effective and successful in achieving their individual and mutual objectives.