



How to Effectively Manage Up

10

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Introduction

Managing Up is often misunderstood. This concept for those in management positions can be confused with “sucking up”—insincerely positive behavior intended to be observed by the manager’s superiors in order to curry favor—also known as being an apple-polisher, teacher’s pet, brownnoser, sycophant or toady. The point of Managing Up is not to impress one’s superiors, but rather to recognize and perform well in those parts of your role as a manager that support the superior.

Leadership positions in academic surgery are complex, and even successful leaders are not uniformly effective across the spectrum of their challenges. However, one of the ways to fall far short of expectations, and to fail to realize one’s potential in areas of strength, is to ignore the importance of Managing Up. Leaders must recognize that they are a part of someone else’s team, in addition to building their own. They need to recognize what is expected of them, and how to perform in ways that support the goals of their superiors. This includes the goals that the superior has formally set, as well as the ones that they have not recognized.

Succeeding in Managing Up can include many types of behavior, and may require specific actions for specific manager/superior relationships. However, a few principles are important. All successful strategies in this arena include most or all of these (Table 10.1). Your goal in this arena is to become the indispensable partner that your boss cannot imagine doing without.

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Table 10.1 Principles of Managing Up

Make time to meet
Trustworthy and loyal/private sounding board— public support
No surprises
Offer solutions/provide options
Do boss's homework first and best
Never bypass the boss
Know the boss's perspective for key goals
Know boss's strengths/Compensate boss's weaknesses
Float the boss's trial balloon

Principles of Managing Up (See Table 10.1)

Make Time to Meet

As a leader in a department of Surgery, it is easy for you to become completely booked with meetings and focused on the important projects for the department. It is surprising how suddenly long stretches of the year can slide by. It is absolutely critical that you as a department leader make, and insist upon, time to meet with your superiors.

During the meetings, it is critical to provide updates on important projects, and to inquire about institutional initiative and plans. However, it is also important to leave some time unstructured to explore areas that are not sufficiently mature to have made it onto a “to-do” list. It is essential to have an institutional perspective to guide the department in ways that best contribute to the whole. You cannot get that perspective without one-on-one conversations.

In any meeting, pay attention to the last 5 min. Whether the meeting lasts 20 min or 2 h, it is common that an issue introduced right at the end is the most important information. This is when one of the parties may finally bring up the topic that they promised themselves to mention.

Trustworthy Private Sounding Board and Public Support

Trust is critical to a strong working relationship at any level, but especially in leadership. As an important part of the institutional team, you should be both constructive and supportive. The institutional leaders should be assured that they can count on you to maintain confidentiality and to understand the importance of “the cone of silence” for discussing ideas that may ultimately not be implemented [see: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cone_of_Silence_\(Get_Smart\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cone_of_Silence_(Get_Smart))]. In those discussions, you should be willing to be critical, or to play devil’s advocate, for the proposal. Sometimes these discussions can be animated, though criticisms should never be personal. The discussion must then remain within the leadership group; a lack of discretion will be followed directly by being left out of the next conversation.

Once a decision is made, however, you must publicly support the plans; the alternative pathway of active opposition to a major issue is often resignation. Dissent outside of the decision process can undermine the implementation process for a plan that the institution has adopted. You take the path of dissent at the peril of the institution, the department and your role. It is disruptive for other members of the department to observe this, and may undermine their commitment that is fundamental to department success.

Your commitment to behave in this way can be difficult in some circumstances. However, to remain central to the decision-process of the institution and to avoid undermining department goals, you must be viewed as a trustworthy colleague who will provide well-considered criticism in private, and strong support in public.

No Surprises

Surprises are great for birthdays, but constructive institutional reactions are built around anticipation. Particularly if there is the potential for bad news, then you should alert the institutional leadership at the earliest possible moment. It is not necessary for all details to be confirmed in this situation. A “heads-up” call followed by a subsequent reassurance is far preferable to a surprise disaster.

Offer Solutions/Provide Options

Leaders are in place in part to anticipate and recognize problems. It is frequent that leadership meetings are centered on addressing some problem or challenge.

When you bring a problem to institutional leadership, it is always necessary to bring at least one recommended course of action. It is preferable to bring a variety of 2–3 options with strengths and weaknesses, including costs, attached. It is never sufficient to bring only the problem, and to anticipate that the solutions will come from the institutional leadership. Even if the resources for the proposed solutions must come from the institutional level, rather than the department, the proposal should come from you as the person who presents the challenge.

Do Boss’s Homework First and Best

Special projects delegated from one’s boss are usually an imposition. Being asked to run a search committee, lead a curriculum review, or chaperone a strategic planning process is rarely an opportunity that is on your wish list. The project may not contribute to the department goals for the year. The time to meet these new targets has not been anticipated in your plans. However, there is very little option to refuse a project assignment, and no real option for putting it off or doing it poorly.

It is perfectly reasonable to accept a project and to note that you will come back with some ideas on the necessary timeline and resources. However, once the project

has been offered, then it must be completed, and it must be done well. This is not just because it is the boss's project. Presumably, the project has important institutional implications, if the institutional leadership has decided to commit some of your time to it. Taking the project on and then doing it poorly, or late (which often go together) does a disservice to the institution and indirectly to your department members.

You should make this project a priority for your own team. Assign some of your best assets to supporting the work. Set an aggressive timeline internally, and get started right away. The opportunity to support the institutional agenda outside of your direct workflow is an important one for both you and the institution.

Never Bypass the Boss

Your boss has a boss. That may be the hospital board, the university president, or some other hierarchy, but everyone reports to someone. It may be tempting at times to go around your immediate institutional leadership to achieve some goal that has been stymied through your usual channels. However, bypassing the boss in this way will likely undermine the remainder of your relationship.

It can be hard to take no for an answer if that stops your progress in an area important to you. Going around your boss to try to get another answer will poison your relationship. In order for them to do their job well, they need to know that you will respect their position. If you are asked to go around the hierarchy by your boss's supervisor, you should first let your boss know of the approach and the goals. They may wish to be involved, or may choose not to do so, but your openness will be positive for your relationship. If your boss's supervisor asks you not to involve your boss, then you are on very fluid ground (quicksand) and should do your best to save yourself.

Know the Boss's Perspective for Key Goals

You have annual, shorter term and longer term goals. It is critical that you understand the priorities of your supervisor with respect to these. Which goal is the most important to them? Which goal is nice but optional? Which annual goal is a critical opportunity this year, and which one could be deferred to next year without penalty?

Goals are important as they guide our actions through the year. Many goals are only partially achieved, or not approached at all due to other circumstances. As the year progresses, you are faced with decisions about which goals to prioritize and which to postpone. If you do not have a clear sense of which goals are important to your institutional leadership, then you may learn at the end of the year that you have chosen to work on the goal that does not best contribute to the institutional progress. Sometimes this is straightforward, but often it is not. Working through the decisions as the year goes along, in regularly scheduled meetings, will avoid surprises on both ends.

Know Boss's Strengths/Compensate Boss's Weaknesses

A part of your role as an “indispensable” partner is to complement the weaknesses and strengths of your colleagues. Everyone has areas of performance in which they excel. Your supervisor may be an expert at building clinical programs and affiliating with outside institutions, but may be bored and ineffective at human resources and compensation plans. You need to recognize that and take advantage of the strengths, while helping them to avoid working in the areas of weakness.

This is not as difficult or deceitful as it sounds. Within a short period, you will understand both the strengths and weaknesses—your boss may even tell you what they are. Then you can look for areas of their strength where you need help, and use their expertise. The weaknesses may be no less obvious, but can be trickier to support. The option of avoidance is fine—do not ask for help with HR issues from your finance expert boss—but you still must avoid surprises and keep them informed. More likely, they will avoid the areas where they are not as skilled. If they are particularly insightful, they may take your advice directly when you offer to help with one of these areas.

Float the Boss's Trial Balloon

Your boss has goals, and they are not always straightforward or easy. Likely, they are more elaborate and dependent upon the actions of others than yours are. In the pursuit of those goals, your boss may have some things that they need to try out—either on a smaller scale in your area, or to be developed by a group within the institution. Your boss needs someone responsible to work through these issues with them in ways that will not necessarily appear to be their failure if the project does not work.

You can be a very useful surrogate by serving as the project leader or trial site for these ideas. If the project is a success, expect the boss to take credit, but know that you have made yourself an indispensable part of the team. If the project fails, then you will not be penalized within your direct group since this can be positioned as an institutional imperative. By performing in this role, you help your supervisor to explore ways to address their goals without taking all of the risk directly.

Conclusion

Managing Up comes naturally to those leaders who recognize that every boss has a boss, and that we are all a part of someone else's team even as we build our own. Empathy for your supervisor—recognizing the world as she or he sees it—will help you to employ the principles delineated here, and to become the indispensable team member that we all aspire to be. Below are case studies that provide examples of common scenarios that involve successful and unsuccessful Managing Up strategies.

Case Studies

Case Study #1: Do Boss's Homework First and Best

A Department of Surgery chair was in the third year of his tenure when asked by the medical school dean to lead the search committee for the next chair of Obstetrics and Gynecology. He quickly assented, and drew on his prior experience as a member of two search committees to determine how to proceed. However, it was September, and he had a full schedule of work for the Fall. He was recruiting faculty members for his own department, preparing for committee meetings at the ACS Clinical Congress, completing an editorial project, and continuing to try to build his practice. At his monthly meeting with the dean in mid-October, he had a suggested slate of committee members to invite, which they revised together, and he invited them. The committee first met in the second week of November to determine an advertising, communication and recruitment plan.

By the time the first candidate files were submitted, the holidays became an obstacle for campus visits. The committee had had four meetings, with little to discuss at each, and one of the leading candidates ultimately withdrew after not visiting the campus because the recruitment process at a rival institution was moving more quickly. The search committee chair was surprised to find that by mid-January, the only viable candidate that they had was the internal division chief from the obstetrics service.

In their January meeting, he expressed his concern to the dean, who responded, "I know—it's a hard job. Don't worry, I won't ask you to do it again."

From a Dean's perspective, one of the most important pieces of work in any year is filling gaps in campus leadership. The delegation of such an important component as leading a search committee is a dangerous opportunity for the committee chair. The Surgery chair in this case failed to recognize that this position had to either be a high priority and done expediently and well, or the request should be denied (also at the chair's peril). In reality—the only option is to accept the request, and then make it a high priority for the Surgery department staff.

Case Study #2: Know the Boss's Priorities for Key Goals

A division chief had been promoted to the role from within the department. She had made her reputation on her research successes and funding for a SPORE program in her field. She had her initial goal-setting meeting with the Department of Surgery chair soon after her promotion, and received guidance on the chair expectations of RVU targets, research productivity and teaching responsibilities.

At the 6 month mark, they met again to review the interval performance. The division chief was very proud of her achievements: the members of the division had submitted three IRB applications, two R21 and two R01 applications. They had publications in press, and abstracts to be presented at upcoming national meetings. To achieve this, she had instituted an internal "mini-sabbatical" system that

provided 4 weeks free of clinical work for faculty members preparing an R-level grant. However, they were 20% below their projected clinical productivity.

To her surprise, the department chair was livid. Though the research productivity was excellent, the clinical productivity would not generate sufficient funds to pay the division expenses including faculty salaries. He was concerned that she had created an expectation among her group that the highest priority was research work, and that there was no responsibility to meet their revenue-generating targets.

In this case, the division chief has failed to understand the department chair's priorities in their mutual goals. She was supposed to increase the research output of her division, but she could not do that at the expense of clinical revenue generation. If her plan was to lose money for some period of time as an investment in expanding the research program, then that should have been explicit from the beginning with both the department chair and her faculty members.

Case Study #3: Compensate for the Boss's Weaknesses

A department chair known for his decisiveness and willingness to make hard decisions had a problem. He had two valuable senior faculty members who were competitive with one another, one of whom had been recruited to his department along with her clinical group, which included her husband. The rivalry between the two senior faculty members had become personal, and had led to accusations of research duplicity against her. An investigation showed that the allegations were not supportable, but the process left her disgruntled with her department and chair, and in search of a new position.

The chair's general approach to problems was head-on. He scheduled meetings with the two senior faculty members to try to resolve the animosity. He offered additional resources to support the work of the offended person, to keep her from leaving. He met with her repeatedly to ask what resources she needed.

However, his department administrator recognized that this effective chair's strength was directness, which would not work in this case. He had little patience for the "softer side" of management. The problem in this case was not resources, and the two senior faculty members were never going to back down from their mutual dislike. She recognized that her boss would not understand the emotional issues in this case, nor the importance of the family dynamic of moving to take this job, and potentially moving again. She suggested that he meet with the offended faculty member's husband to discuss the effects of another potential move on the family and their joint careers. By changing the conversation from one of purely professional circumstance to a broader outlook of the effect on the family, and the career of the "trailing spouse," the chair was able to retain the program.

In this case, the administrator was able to help her boss accomplish something outside of his natural skill set (Compensate for the Boss's Weakness), by recommending a course of action that she knew he would not recognize on his own.

Case Study #4: Floating the Boss's Trial Balloon

Academic departments have complex missions; of the three major ones (clinical, research and teaching), only the clinical work is easily and regularly measured. One department chair wished to have quantification as clear for research and teaching as she had with RVUs (relative value units) for the clinical work. She charged two division chiefs with developing a system to count the time and effort put into research work (funded and unfunded), teaching and administrative effort. She specifically wanted a measurement system that could quantify these efforts.

The two chiefs spent 3 months of careful work reviewing systems used in other departments, interviewing faculty members and making smaller presentations of portions of the plan. When the full plan was presented to the faculty, there were substantial objections to it based upon the amount of effort that would be necessary to keep track of all of the activities. With the opportunity to gauge the full faculty reaction to the plan, she was in position to back away from it, rejecting the idea that the faculty would spend all of their time making journal entries. The plan was never implemented, though the chair was careful to thank her two division chiefs publicly for exploring this on behalf of the department.

In this case, both the chair and the division chiefs did their jobs well. The division chiefs were willing to be the point people on the chair's project, and to bear the criticism of the proposal (Float the Boss's Trial Balloon). They enabled the chair to explore and ultimately reject the plan without having it be her direct setback. She used the division chiefs to evaluate this approach, and expended a lot of their effort on it, but in the end rejected the work-product rather than the people.

Suggested Reading

Abbajay M. *Managing up: how to move up, win at work, and succeed with any type of boss*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley; 2018.

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Managing Up. Harvard business review 20 minute manager series. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press; 2014.