

The Hard Truth About Managing Up

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The thin, neatly stapled stack of papers landed on my desk with a soft swish. Looking up, Doug was standing on the other side of my desk with a tight smile. “Read this,” he said. And then he walked away.

Doug was my no-nonsense boss, and the CEO of a company I worked for just out of college. I had been on the job for just a few months. The company was lean and growing fast, which ultimately allowed me to quickly earn more responsibility. It also translated into a lot of exposure to Doug, including heavy travel, calling on our top customers together and frequent evening calls to calibrate. I had eight interviews before I got the job offer, and within 48 hours of starting, I was asked abruptly to fly down to Los Angeles, where I would live for the next three weeks, managing a key test market of our product across several stores of a national retailer. Doug was successful, had earned his MBA at Harvard Business School and was hard charging. As a 23-year-old new college grad, I wanted to learn as much as I could from someone like this. When Doug dropped that article on my desk, I was as green as they come.



Nervously picking up the stack, the title read “Managing Your Boss.” It was published by something called [Harvard Business Review](#), which I didn’t know existed until that

moment. It turns out that this article is one of the true classics that all professionals should read at some point in their careers, and it changed the way I thought about my relationship with my boss (and all superiors), from that moment forward. Perhaps Doug didn't have the words to say these things to me, but the article certainly did. I felt a mix of embarrassment, insult and the feeling that I was being given bad news. Scanning the article, my 23-year-old hubris immediately (and falsely) interpreted that Doug was saying that he was more important than I was, and that I need to accommodate him. Of course, you have to forgive my younger, cockier self, who already knew everything about life. Fortunately, I had the good sense to take a deep breath and reread it.

So what does "Managing Your Boss" say? In a nutshell, it explains that your boss needs you as much as you need them, and that the management of this relationship is squarely your responsibility. It calls out the confusing reality that your boss must serve as both your supporter and evaluator, which changes depending on the situation. To be sure, it is definitely not a guide on how to flatter your boss, nor does it recommend that. Rather, it provides you insight and empathy for your boss as a person with pressures, goals, emotions and a life outside of work just like you. It also makes clear that while your boss may not be perfect, it's up to you to try to lean into strengths and compensate for weaknesses. Help your boss in a way that best helps you. Why? Because your boss is your best touch point to the rest of the organization and likely has sway, if not direct authority, over resources and relationships to help you do your job better.



The article argues that you must find a working style that works for both of you. You may have heard this described as "managing up." This process can include observing and modifying how and when your boss likes to communicate, setting and managing

expectations appropriately and trying to leave your own fears and ego at the door. Above all, it reminds you that delivering on the job, and how you do so, is the foundation of how you build a foundation of trust with your direct supervisor. This also means that you need to increase your own self-awareness, including how you perceive and react to authority.

For someone just out of undergraduate, it was pretty mind blowing. Consider the 23-year-old me for a moment. I had just spent around 20 years in an educational system where the teachers and professors told the student what to do for each and every assignment. I had grown up with an immigrant, autocratic father who liked to give instructions and criticism equally. I had played competitive sports including during college, where coaches maximize every minute of your training and call the shots during games and tournaments. A sudden adjustment to proactively setting my own goals, seeking support, building consensus, negotiating deadlines, managing expectations and course correcting were foreign concepts. Telling someone like me to go and be “proactive” probably wasn’t clear enough direction.

Fast-forward 20 years later, after having hired and managed many, I confess that it can be challenging to do well. There have been fleeting moments I’ve been great, and far more times I’ve been far less than great. And from my own experience, it’s a luxury to have people work for you who understand how to maturely and effectively help manage the mutual dependency that is the supervisor-subordinate relationship. Likewise, you never move beyond working for someone in some capacity. The more you learn to help and influence those who have authority, the more you can get what you need. I still occasionally reread this article, and sometimes give it to others, hopefully with a little more explanation than Doug did when he gave it to me.

I’ve now worked for four strong CEOs. Each have different personalities, and my own needs have changed over the years. In the end, I worked for Doug for seven years before going to get my own graduate degree. In many ways, he was my most important boss, whose mentoring still helps me today. While he was hard on me, he was good for me, and I am grateful.

Now, go read *Managing Your Boss* today. You can't get it as a stand-alone article anymore, but it's contained within a useful collection of articles called [*Managing Up and Across*](#). It's worth the read.