

Refuse to Be Undermanaged

You show up at work one day, and much of your job seems to be coming unglued: you have a voice mail from your manager telling you the project you worked so hard on for the last two weeks is all wrong. You think, *Well, I told you I didn't have enough experience to take that task on!* Then you receive an e-mail from a manager in another department who is hounding you about “taking way too long” with yet another project; you need to get that to her “immediately.”

Meanwhile, you were planning to spend the morning finishing up one of your routine tasks—dotting some *i*'s and crossing a few *t*'s—but you've received so many urgent e-mails, you figure you better answer them before you do anything else. Last week the same scenario played out, and you forgot to go back and dot the *i*'s and cross the *t*'s; in the end, the task had to be redone at the last minute. You ended up working very late that day, and everybody was mad. You don't want to do that again,

so you've been trying to lie low and stay out of everybody's way. But now you have these managers messing with your day before it even starts!

What's going on? You think of yourself as a high-performer. But you start second-guessing yourself: *One manager tells me to do one thing. Another tells me to do something totally different. How am I supposed to know what takes priority? How am I supposed to know what is up to me and what's not? The bosses here don't have any idea how to manage! Only rarely does one of them spend enough time with me to give me the guidance I need, or to make sure I have the resources to do the job, or to help me problem-solve. Half the time I don't get any recognition for the work I do well, no matter how hard I work.*

If this is anything like your situation at work, either now or sometime in the recent past, then you are not alone!

What's going on here?

It is tempting to look at the scenario described above and blame the managers or even the entire enterprise. Maybe this company has a disproportionate number of managers who are true jerks—but probably not. It is more likely that the problem is hiding in plain sight: *Undermanagement*.

Across all industries and at all levels of organizations there is a shocking and profound epidemic of what I call undermanagement. It is the opposite of micromanagement. The vast majority of supervisory relationships between employees and their bosses lack the day-to-day engagement necessary to consistently maintain the very basics of management: clear expectations; necessary resources; real performance tracking; and fair credit and reward. In fact, most employees report that they feel disengaged from their immediate boss(es); that two-way communication is sorely deficient; and that employees rarely

get the daily guidance, resources, feedback, and reward that they need.

In my book *It's Okay to Be the Boss*, I explored the causes of our pernicious undermanagement epidemic and tried to show readers how just about any problem in any workplace can be traced back to a case of undermanagement. Although *undermanagement* is not a household word like *micromanagement*, it should be, because undermanagement is a success-crushing syndrome, and it is worth fighting against. Indeed, the following consequences of undermanagement make the impact of micromanagement look like nothing:

- Unnecessary problems arise.
- Small problems, which could have been solved easily, turn into big problems.
- Resources are squandered.
- Employees perform tasks and carry out responsibilities the wrong way for longer periods of time.
- Low-performers hang around, causing problems for everyone else (and collecting the same paycheck as everyone else, too!).
- High-performers get frustrated, lose commitment, and think about leaving.
- Employees are not set up to perform at their best.
- Managers spend their management time in all the wrong ways.

You may not be aware of undermanagement in your workplace. But look around you. I bet undermanagement is costing

you every single day. It robs you of positive experiences in the workplace and prevents you from reaching greater success. Undermanagement gets in the way of your learning and development, makes it harder for you to optimize relationships, and diminishes your opportunities for new tasks, responsibilities, and projects. Undermanagement very likely causes you to earn less than you should and prevents you from gaining more flexibility in your schedule and in other work conditions.

So who is responsible for this undermanagement epidemic? After all, isn't it the manager's job to manage? Shouldn't the bosses be taking charge? Yes. And I believe managing is a sacred responsibility. If there's a problem, the boss is the solution. If you are the boss, then you are the one everyone is counting on.

Unfortunately, too many leaders, managers, and supervisors are failing to lead, manage, and supervise. They simply do not take charge on a day-to-day basis. They fail to spell out expectations every step of the way, ensure that necessary resources are in place, track performance, correct failure, and reward success. They don't know how to, they don't want to, or they are just afraid to.

Most managers are under a tremendous amount of pressure. They typically move into supervisory positions because they are very good at something, but not usually because they are especially good at managing people. Once promoted, most new managers receive very little in the way of effective management training. And the legacy of leadership in most organizations great and small is still "hands off": "Here's the mission. Figure it out. Wait for us to notice you. We'll let you know if you do something wrong, and the system will reward you the same as everyone else."

The pendulum of management thinking, books, and training has also swung in the exactly same, wrong direction toward hands-off management. Popular books have naively insisted that employees do their best work when they are free to manage themselves. According to this false-empowerment approach, employees should “own” their work and be free to make their own decisions. Managers are merely facilitators; they should not tell employees how to do their jobs but rather let them come up with their own methods. Make employees feel good inside, and results will take care of themselves.

But let’s face it. You know very well that somebody is in charge and that you will be held accountable. You do not have the power to do things your own way; you are not free to ignore tasks you don’t like; you are not free to do as you please. You can only make your own decisions within defined guidelines and parameters that are determined by others according to the strict logic of the enterprise at hand.

When your managers give you responsibility without sufficient direction and support, that is not empowering you. That is downright negligence. Unfortunately, most managers have bought this false-empowerment philosophy and don’t take a stronger hand when it comes to managing; they don’t even perform the basic tasks of managing. Most managers, then, undermanage. Here are the top seven reasons why they undermanage and how that affects you directly:

One: They are afraid of micromanaging

I often say that micromanagement is a giant red herring. Is there even such a thing as “micromanagement” at all? Of

course, some managers overdo it sometimes, but the vast majority *underdo* it. Real micromanagement, if it exists at all, is quite rare. The funny thing is that most cases mistaken for micromanagement turn out to be undermanagement in disguise. Let me show this through three scenarios:

1. Your manager asks you to check in with him every step of the way in order to make basic decisions or take simple actions. Is this a case of micromanagement? No. If an employee is unable to make basic decisions or take simple actions on his own, it's almost always because the manager has not prepared the employee in advance to do so. Your manager must make sure you understand how to accomplish your tasks and carry out your responsibilities and must equip you with the tools and skills you need to do your job.

2. You make decisions and take actions without ever checking in with your manager. When she finds out about them, you get in big trouble. Burned for taking initiative? Yes. Micromanagement? No. If an employee does not know where her discretion begins and ends, that's because the manager has not spelled out guidelines and parameters for the employee up front. Your manager has to painstakingly clarify what is within your authority to do, and what is not.

3. Your manager is constantly tangled up in your tasks, or you are getting tangled up in your manager's tasks—in the end, you just can't tell which tasks belong to the manager and which ones belong to you. Isn't that micromanagement? No. It is a result of your manager's failure to delegate. Your manager has to spell out exactly which tasks belong to you and which ones belong to her.

Of course, there are cases in which managers do overdo it. Sometimes this is the result of an obsessive-compulsive manager or a manager who wants an assistant at his beck and call—and that is not a management relationship. Or maybe it's just the manager's first day managing a new employee. The good news is that when managers accidentally manage too closely, they can just step back a little. No harm done. But if they undermanage, the harm is pervasive and damaging to everyone involved.

Two: They are afraid of being unfair by not treating all employees the same

Where does this fear come from? First, an aversion to any kind of litigation risk has led to a blanket default presumption in the working world that differential treatment of employees is “against the rules.” Second, political correctness has caused many people to self-censor any mention of differences between and among individuals—even observable merit-based differences. Third, a popular misunderstanding of psychology and human development theory has people mistakenly believing that in essence, “we are all winners.” Thus, the underlying theory that many managers have walked away with is that because every person has innate value, we should treat everybody the same.

This sense of false fairness often means managers are unwilling to provide employees with extra rewards when they go the extra mile. Since managers can't do everything for everybody, most of them take the easy way out, rewarding nobody specially. Limited resources for rewards are further watered

down by trying to spread them around equally. The result: low- and mediocre-performers enjoy the same rewards as high-performers such as yourself! When your manager suffers from this “false fairness” syndrome, she fails to give you—her best employee—the flexibility you need to continue working hard and smart, and deprives herself of a key tool for motivating her employees. What’s truly fair is giving you the chance to earn more or less on the basis of your actual performance.

Three: They are afraid of being perceived as a “jerk” and want to be seen as “nice”

Surprisingly, what I call the “false nice-guy complex” is more widespread than you can imagine. False nice-guy managers refuse to make decisions, give orders, and hold people accountable. They tell themselves they are abdicating these responsibilities because they don’t want to be a “jerk.” The irony is that false nice guys tend to soft-pedal their authority so much that things are bound to go wrong. When they do, these bosses get frustrated and angry, and tend to act like jerks: arbitrary, out of line, loud, mean, and even abusive. Afterwards, they feel terribly guilty for behaving this way. So what do they do? They go back to soft-pedaling their authority, without ever realizing that they are caught in a vicious cycle.

Are they really being nice-guy managers by failing to provide the direction, support, and coaching that employees need in order to succeed? In truth, they are simply letting themselves off the hook to avoid the uncomfortable tension that comes with being stuck between the boardroom and the front lines—being the one who has to negotiate the competing needs and desires of the employer and the employee. They are refusing

to take responsibility for their authority, which has real consequences that are anything but nice: problems arise, sometimes big ones. When problems are not dealt with, they may turn into disasters. The best way for a manager to avoid being a jerk is to accept his or her legitimate authority and feel comfortable using it. Genuine nice-guy managers do what it takes to help employees succeed so that those employees can deliver great service to customers and earn more rewards for themselves.

Yes, of course, some managers are true jerks. Here are the seven common true-jerk boss personas:

1. The boss who lets small problems slide over and over again, but then comes down like a ton of bricks when one of those problems gets out of control.
2. The boss who is compulsive or obsessive and imposes that on you.
3. The boss who doesn't want to manage but wants a beck-and-call assistant.
4. The boss who pretends things are up to you when they are not.
5. The boss who doesn't keep track of what's going on but makes big decisions that affect everyone.
6. The boss who soft-pedals his authority until something goes terribly wrong, and then comes in and chews you out.
7. The boss who is intimidating, mean, or abusive.

In Chapter Nine I will go into detail with each of these personas and provide best practices for dealing with these types of true-jerk boss.

Four: They are afraid of having difficult confrontations with employees

Lots of managers find that the most painful aspect of managing is having difficult conversations, even confrontations, with employees. Such managers often avoid day-to-day conversations with employees about their work because they are trying to avoid these confrontations. But when your manager avoids talking with you about your day-to-day work, then confrontations actually become more likely. Why?

If you and your boss are not having regular conversations about your work, then neither one of you is experienced at them. If you and your boss are not talking regularly, your boss has probably not been making expectations clear. When a problem absolutely must be dealt with and he finally confronts you, both of you are more likely to be frustrated and angry. The conversation will not only come as a big unpleasant surprise to you but is more likely to become heated. There is only one way managers can avoid difficult confrontations: having lots of mundane conversations about the day-to-day work before anything goes wrong!

Five: They are afraid to break organizational rules and procedures and feel constrained by bureaucratic red tape

Managers tell me every day that despite their best efforts, they are held back by bureaucratic rules, regulations, and red tape. Many find navigating organizational procedures and legal requirements daunting. Some, in fact, have gotten into real trouble for purposely or inadvertently doing something wrong. Still

more have found themselves tangled up in endless paperwork, meetings, and calls regarding a personnel issue, often with a very unsatisfying end for everybody involved.

Dealing with all the complexities of employment rules and organizational procedures can be a pain in the neck. Still, some managers hide behind this challenge as an excuse to avoid managing. Others work through the challenge every day in order to make sure the employees they manage are getting the management basics. How should your manager work within and around the rules? She should learn them backward and forward—and then work them. Performance is always the fair and legal basis for discriminating in the workplace. As long as your boss can demonstrate that any rewards or detriments to you are based solely on your work performance, there is no basis for a claim of unlawful discrimination. Would you want it any other way?

Six: They are natural leaders, but not very good at managing

Yes, some of your managers might be gifted natural leaders. If so, then congratulations are due. The natural leader is, of course, blessed with a rare gift. And you are fortunate to have a gifted natural leader to follow. Fortunate, maybe. You see, lots of natural leaders are not such great managers. They might be visionary, charismatic, articulate, and unusually energetic. They might be motivating and inspirational, and people may want to follow them. But sometimes they rely too heavily on their natural gifts and don't pay enough attention to the management basics. As a result, they may build people up, but sometimes they build people up to fail.

Missing in most workplaces are leaders at all levels who consistently practice the basics of management: providing direction and guidance, holding people accountable, dealing with failure, and rewarding success. These are the most important practices when it comes to helping you get work done better and faster, avoid unnecessary problems, solve problems quickly, stay on track, succeed, and earn more of the credit and rewards you need and want. Managers don't need to be natural leaders to do this; all they need to do is consistently practice the basics of management.

Seven: They feel like they don't have enough time to spend managing you

Most managers get caught in a time trap: managers feel like they don't have enough time to manage, so they avoid having regular one-on-one conversations with employees to make sure they are on track. As a result, things go wrong, sometimes terribly wrong. When things go wrong, managers have no choice but to spend a bunch of time fixing problems that never should have happened in the first place. By the time managers are done fixing whatever has gone wrong, they *really* feel like they don't have enough time to manage.

Good managers know that they can't afford *not* to spend time managing you. They have regular one-on-one conversations with their employees, setting expectations, goals, and deadlines; assigning necessary resources; solving problems; correcting course; reviewing work in progress; and planning next steps. If your boss does that with you for a few weeks, then mark my words: more and more of your conversations will be

“good news” conversations; there will be few problems to fix; and your boss won’t be wasting any time.

WHEN THEY UNDERMANAGE, YOU PAY THE PRICE

Whatever is behind your bosses’ undermanagement tendencies and despite the lack of management support you receive, *you* are still expected to meet today’s higher expectations on the job. *You* are under more pressure. *You* are expected to work longer, harder, smarter, faster, and better. There’s no room for downtime, waste, or inefficiency. *You* must learn and use new technologies, processes, and skills, all the while adjusting to ongoing organizational changes. *You* receive less guidance and support, work in smaller teams with greater requirements, and have less time to rest, recuperate, and prepare. And *you* want to know, “Boss, what do you want from me?”

Perhaps getting answers to this question has always been hard, but in the workplace of the not-so-distant past, at least you could count on job security and long-term vesting rewards. As long as you kept your head down and your mouth shut and did as you were told, you had a good shot at staying employed and climbing the ladder. There was a good chance you would work for the same boss for a long time. Maybe you would both climb the ladder together in the organization. In the workplace of the past, nobody held your hand either, but in return you could hope that the system would take care of you in the long run.

Not anymore.

Nowadays, the world is highly interconnected, fiercely competitive, knowledge-driven, and global. Employers are geared for constant change. In order to survive, they need to

get more and better work out of fewer people, squeeze cost out of the process, and be lean and flexible. That means you need to be increasingly aggressive in order to take care of yourself and your family. Why would you trust the “system” or the organization to take care of you over time?

The chain of command is also no longer clear in most organizations. Most organizations have become flatter as layers of management have been removed in the last decade. More employees are being managed by short-term project leaders instead of “organization-chart managers.” Who has authority over employees? The answer often depends on the project, task, and responsibility. Who is in charge? Whoever has control of resources, work conditions, and rewards. To whom do *you* answer today? If you are like most employees, you answer to multiple bosses—some directly, others indirectly. You are often pulled in different directions by these authority figures who have competing interests and agendas. All of them have the ability to improve or worsen your daily work conditions, your chances of getting rewards, and your long-term career prospects. And all of them are different. Some are great. Some are good. Some are mediocre. Some are pretty bad. And some are downright horrible. Then, too, some are true jerks. They each have their own style, strengths, and weaknesses.

Under these circumstances, *you* are the only one *you* can control. You can control your role and conduct in each of these relationships. You can control how you manage these relationships and how you get what you need from them. And you have no choice: if you want to survive, succeed, and prosper, *you* have to get really good at managing your bosses.

Why?

The boss—at every level—is the most important person in the workplace today. On this there is widespread consensus. Study after study shows that the relationship employees have with their bosses is the number one factor in the ability of employees to produce high-quality work consistently, to feel good about work, and to earn credit, flexible work conditions, and greater rewards.

You rely on your immediate boss more than on any other individual for meeting your basic needs and expectations at work, and for dealing with just about any issue that arises at work. The boss is your point of contact. But much more than that, on a daily basis the boss defines your work experience. To become and remain a consistent high-performer, you need bosses who are strong and highly engaged, who know exactly who you are and exactly what you are doing every step of the way. You need bosses who let you know that you are important and that your work is important. You need bosses who spell out expectations clearly; who teach you best practices; who warn you of pitfalls; who help you solve small problems before they fester and grow; and who reward you when you go the extra mile. You want bosses who will set you up for success and thereby help you earn what you need and want from the job, every step of the way.

Your ability to manage these relationships will have the single greatest impact on your productivity, performance, morale, and ability to earn credit and rewards for your contributions. You need strong bosses, and you are going to have to help them get there. That means you need to take charge and start managing your boss. You need to take responsibility for your role and your conduct in every single management relationship with every single boss.

For a lot of people the idea of taking responsibility for managing their boss requires a fundamental rethinking of their role and their relationships in the workplace. The thought of “managing your boss” is a challenging one. The boss is above you, over you, and in charge of you—the employee. Even if you are a manager yourself, when you are dealing with your boss, you are the employee.

But because your boss is the key to getting what you need to survive and succeed at work, you need a strategy for managing your boss and practical tactics that work in a world of constantly shifting, complex authority relationships.

BAD ADVICE FOR MANAGING YOUR BOSS

Developing a strategy for managing your boss and dealing with the highly complex authority relationships in your workplace is tougher than it appears. Not only is the advice doled out by experts not always helpful, but most of us are so used to being undermanaged that most of us have bought into a myth of how we ought to be managed by our bosses or how we ought to behave at work.

If you are looking for guidance on how to manage your boss, zillions of so-called experts out there will be happy to provide it. The problem is that so much of the advice about “managing up” or “managing your boss” doesn’t tell the whole story.

Some experts offer advice only for dealing with an incompetent boss or a bully, but they fail to see that unless you’ve been managing your boss closely, you won’t even know if you are dealing with an incompetent or a bully.

Other experts suggest that you cater to your boss and follow him or her up the ladder, but this approach is stuck in the

outmoded view that supervisory relationships are simple, fixed, long term, and hierarchical. Most supervisory relationships today are complex, shifting, short term, and transactional, so you have to be prepared to adapt to the many bosses you are likely to have over time, and pursue your own career.

Other experts advocate manipulating your boss to meet your personal needs. But playing your boss to squeeze out as much benefit for you as you possibly can in exchange for the least effort on your part is self-serving, deceptive, and dishonorable. When you constantly take advantage of your boss, you are in a dead-end relationship.

Finally, some experts argue you should “partner” with your boss, but they fail to acknowledge the importance of the power differential in a boss-employee relationship. Your boss is your boss precisely because he or she has authority, influence, and control of resources that directly affect you.

Dovetailing with all of this so-called expert advice are many widespread misconceptions about how we ought to relate to our bosses. I ask people in the workplace every day why they don’t take a stronger hand when it comes to managing their bosses. They almost always give me the same reasons. The most common myths, explained below, discourage so many employees at all levels from taking more responsibility for their relationships with managers.

Myth 1: If you are a high-performer, then your boss shouldn’t tell you how to do your job

No matter how good you may be at your job, everybody needs guidance, direction, and support in order to succeed. You don’t want to waste your valuable time and energy doing the wrong

things or doing the right things the wrong way. Right? Even if you know more about the specific task, responsibility, or project than your boss does, you are not operating in a vacuum.

You need to make sure your work fits with your company's overall mission. You need to have goals articulated and the guidelines and parameters for your tasks and responsibilities spelled out. You need to be given concrete deadlines, clear timelines, and reasonable performance benchmarks to meet. And your boss is the person who needs to communicate these requirements to you and to make sure you stay on track. That's the only way to become and remain a high-performer. (But if you are a high-performer, you probably already know all that.)

Myth 2: In order to be creative at work, you need to be left alone to do things your own way

If you really want to be creative at work, the first thing you need to know is exactly what is up to you, and what is not. So much of what gets done at work is simply not up to you. You need to know the requirements of every task, responsibility, or project before you can even think about being creative. Even if you are in a creative position, only when you know what is actually up to you will you have uncovered the small space in which you can be creative.

Myth 3: If someone else is getting special treatment, then you should too

If someone else is getting special treatment, then figure out exactly what that person did to earn the special treatment and what exactly you need to do to earn the special treatment you

want for yourself. How would it be fair to treat everybody in a workplace exactly the same? That's only fair if you are running a commune. The reality is that we are not all winners, as everybody knows. Treating everybody the same, regardless of their performance, is totally unfair. If your coworkers are receiving rewards that you are not getting, take that as a big reality check. What you need is a fair and accurate assessment of your performance so that you can continually improve, and thereby earn more of the rewards you want.

Don't be the squeaky wheel asking for more. Be the self-starting high-performer who is constantly *earning* more.

Myth 4: The path to success is catering to your boss's style and preferences

Your boss's style and preferences may or may not be smart business practices. Your best path to success is making sure you get clear and realistic expectations every step of the way, the necessary resources to complete your tasks, fair and accurate and honest feedback, and appropriate recognition and rewards for your work.

It is true that you need to align yourself as best you can with what works for each of your bosses. Some bosses prefer updates in writing; others prefer verbal reports. Some bosses prefer big-picture reports. Others like to keep track of the details. You should certainly try to tune in to each boss's preferences, but you cannot afford to compromise the basic elements you need in order to succeed. If your boss prefers that you "take a stab" at a project without giving you clear expectations, then you had better probe a little: "Exactly how long do you want me to dedicate to 'taking a stab'? Are there any things that

I absolutely may not, should not, can not do while ‘taking a stab’?” If your boss is not forthcoming with feedback, you need to find a way to monitor, measure, and document your own performance. If your boss’s style doesn’t include giving fair credit and rewards for great performance, then how much longer are you going to be giving your great performance to that manager?

Myth 5: “Making friends” with your boss is smart workplace politics

False friendships are a waste of time. Real friendships may be wonderful in your personal life, but they are likely to complicate your situation at work. The smartest workplace politics is to keep your work relationships focused on the work. That is not to say that real friendships do not or should not occur in the workplace. Of course they do. Real friendships develop over time at work, including friendships with people who are your boss. If that’s your situation, then you’ll have to work hard to protect that friendship from the realities of the workplace. That means you need to manage your boss very well, not just for the sake of your success at work but also for the sake of your friendship.

In the vast majority of situations, however, your boss is not actually a friend. Maybe you two shoot the breeze. Maybe once in a while you have a brief personal connection, a moment of sharing something personal. You interact at the occasional formal or informal social event outside of work. The problem is that this sort of rapport is very thin, and it collapses the moment the work gets serious.

What is the best workplace politics? Build authentic relationships with your bosses by developing genuine rapport,

regardless of whether you are friends. How? By talking about the work on a regular basis. This is what the two of you have in common that is authentic. This is the kind of rapport that makes the work go better, that won't collapse as soon as the work gets serious.

Myth 6: Hiding from mistakes and problems is a good way to avoid trouble

The best way to avoid trouble is to immediately come clean about the details of any mistakes or problems as they occur, as part of your regular, one-on-one dialogues with your boss about the work. When you deal with mistakes and problems as they occur, you are much more likely to solve them while they are still small and manageable, before they have gotten out of control.

When you gloss over small mistakes without solving them, they sometimes drift away—but they are more likely to recur. Those recurring small problems may become part of the fabric of your work, but sometimes small problems that recur incessantly cause difficult confrontations, as when coworkers or the boss finally explode in an outburst of frustration.

Even more serious, small mistakes and problems may fester and grow and, over time, become big problems. By the time you have a conversation with your boss about the problem, it's usually too late. Why is this? First, solving a problem after it has festered is much more difficult than preventing that problem in the first place, or solving it while it was smaller. Much time and energy has to be spent cleaning up the mess. Second, in the midst of a problem, neither you nor the boss in question is going to be at your best. By then everybody is

stressed, frustrated, and in a hurry. Sometimes these conversations become heated. Your boss is likely to feel that she has spent her management time “fighting fires,” thus getting behind on her “real” work. Sometimes it’s hard to start feeling good about working with this boss again after a difficult confrontation.

No problem is so small that it should be left alone. If you include regular problem solving in your ongoing one-on-one dialogues with every single boss, then nine out of ten performance problems will be solved quickly and easily, or altogether avoided. Helping your boss nitpick at the small mistakes and problems in your work is a good thing. It sends a message to your boss that high performance is your focus and that you realize that details matter.

Myth 7: No news is good news, but being “coached” on your performance is bad news

No news may not be bad, but it definitely does you no good. Being coached on your performance, on the other hand, is an opportunity to improve—and that is always good news.

Why does “performance coaching” have a bad name among so many in the workplace? One reason is surely that most bosses think of coaching an employee only when they think the employee has a recurring performance problem, such as missed deadlines, poor work quality, or a bad attitude toward customers or coworkers.

But why should performance coaching only be about addressing performance problems? The voice of performance coaching is steady and persistent, relentlessly methodical, hands-on, enthusiastic, and pushy. It is the constant banter of focus, improvement, and accountability: “What can I teach you right

now? What can you improve right now?" A great coach helps you remember to be purposeful about every detail to build your skills. From focusing, you learn focus itself.

Obviously, some bosses have more natural talent than others when it comes to coaching. Keep your eyes peeled and your ears open for opportunities to be coached by your bosses, or by anyone who is an objective, encouraging voice with experience and wisdom to share. Don't listen for those hollering, "Rah! Rah!" around your workplace. Don't be fooled by contrived enthusiasm. Look for the real teachers among your bosses, and soak up their teachings. Assure the boss that you very much welcome candid feedback in detail, both positive and corrective. Try to turn every conversation with your boss into a coaching session.

Myth 8: If your boss doesn't like to read paperwork, you don't need to keep track of your performance in writing

You owe it to yourself and the organization to keep track of everything you do in writing. Most managers monitor employee performance only incidentally, as when they happen to observe the employee working; when they are presented with the employee's work product; when there is a big win; or when there is a notable problem. They rarely document employee performance unless they are required to do so, leaving no written track record other than those bottom-line reports that tell so little about the day-to-day actions of an employee. Whether or not your boss keeps track of your day-to-day performance in writing, *you* should. Here are six reasons why:

Reason 1: You probably have a lot to keep track of at work and need a tracking system to document it all.

Reason 2: Keeping track your performance in writing will help you add clarity to your working relationship with each boss. Writing down the details of your one-on-one conversations with your boss is a good way to avoid misunderstandings over what was said about what, and when. If you get in the habit, together with each boss, of tracking your conversations in writing, then you are more likely to stay on the same page.

Reason 3: Tracking your own performance in writing will help you and your boss create a shared commitment to the expectations you agree on and document together.

Reason 4: Written tracking is the key to your ongoing performance improvement. Constant evaluation and feedback help you revise and adjust your performance, and they help your boss revise and adjust her marching orders to you. In order to do that, you have to keep score—in writing.

Reason 5: When you document your performance in writing on an ongoing basis, you will be in a stronger position to make the case for receiving more generous rewards or applying for promotions based on your valuable contributions.

Reason 6: If you document your performance on a continuing basis, you will help your boss complete the review process in ways that reflect more accurately your actual day-to-day performance.

Myth 9: If you are not a “people person,” then you’ll have a hard time getting ahead in the workplace

Some people are unusually charismatic, observant, receptive, quick-witted, articulate, engaging, energetic, and likeable. No doubt, these Princes and Princesses Charming have a big advantage over the rest of us. But charm alone doesn’t cut it

in today's fiercely competitive, rapidly changing, knowledge-driven, global, and nonstop world. The key to getting ahead in today's workplace and the wider free market for talent is being really good at consistently delivering valuable contributions at a swift, steady pace, while constantly adapting to changing circumstances. That takes more than relationship mojo.

If you happen to be one of these natural “people persons,” then you are very blessed. But I'm afraid that won't be enough in today's world. To succeed, you also have to consistently practice the basics of self-management and boss management. If you take personal responsibility for your role and your conduct in your working relationship with your bosses and make sure you are managing every boss closely every step of the way, you'll be worth your weight in gold—even if you don't call people by name, look people in the eye when you talk, smile, or “back-channel” in conversations.

Whether or not you are a people person, learn proven techniques for self-management and boss management, and practice those techniques diligently until they become skills, and then habits. Don't try to be someone you are not. Be yourself. Be genuine. Relax. Then follow the proven techniques and practice, practice, practice.

Myth 10: Some bosses are just too busy to meet with you

No matter how busy your boss may be, your boss does not have time *not* to meet with you on a regular basis.

Don't get me wrong. You should be very careful about wasting even one minute of your bosses' time—or anybody's time, for that matter. Your bosses have their own tasks, responsibilities,

and projects besides their management obligations to you and their other direct-reports. Your boss is busy. You are busy. Nobody has a minute to waste.

That's exactly why neither you nor your boss has time to *not* meet regularly to talk about your work. When your boss doesn't spend time with you one-on-one, expectations often remain unclear; misunderstandings occur; you don't get the resources you need; you don't receive regular feedback to guide you; and even if you succeed against all odds, you probably won't get the credit you deserve.

But how often can you succeed against all odds? Without clear expectations, adequate resources, monitoring, and measuring of performance, the boss who tried so hard to avoid spending time managing you ends up spending lots of time managing you anyway—only now you are set up to fail instead of being set up to succeed. That's because small problems pile up or fester unattended until they become so big that they cannot be ignored. At that point, the boss has no choice but to chase them down and solve them, and then feel even more pressed for time. As a result, he goes right back to avoiding spending time managing you; so, the next occasion that he'll make time for management is when there is another big problem to chase down and solve.

Make your one-on-one time with every boss brief, straightforward, efficient, and all about the work. But make sure you get that regular time with every boss you answer to directly. If you push your bosses to put the management time where it belongs—up front, before anything goes right, wrong, or average—you will be sure to get the basic elements you need to succeed. If you make sure that the time every boss spends with you is effective and that it pays off in productivity, bosses are

going to want to give you that time. You will gain a reputation for making good use of management time.

GETTING PAST THE MYTHS

All managers would prefer to manage self-starting high-performers who do tons of work very well and very fast without any guidance or support, who make no mistakes, and who have very few needs and expectations. I promise you, if given their druthers, just about all managers would opt for this type of employee. The only problem is that this type of employee doesn't exist. Only the very worst managers actually manage as if this fantasyland could possibly be true. They want you to do everything on your own. But when you do everything on your own, you are not likely to have anywhere near as much success as you would with the guidance, support, and engagement of a boss who is experienced, knowledgeable, and effective.

You have only two choices when working with such managers. You can avoid them and hope they find another employee to entangle and ignore. Or whenever possible you can manage that boss so closely that she either learns to engage with you effectively or else decides she would rather deal with someone who will be content to operate blindly in a sink-or-swim environment. Good riddance.

Great managers, by contrast, don't just want to work with high-flying superstar employees. And while they don't want to work either with lazy low-performers who don't care about the work and are not motivated to succeed, they are happy to work with employees at all levels of ability, skill, and experience. Great managers are ready to help you learn and grow. But if you want to get a lot of attention from the truly great

managers, know this: great managers will expect you to take responsibility for your role and your conduct in the management relationship. If you want them to manage you, you had better be prepared to manage them.

Even if you have a great boss, great bosses have bad days, bad weeks, and even bad months when they drop the ball in attending to their management responsibilities. Even great bosses make mistakes that will have a huge impact on you if you are not sharing responsibility in the management relationship.

Of course, you cannot always work for a great boss. All bosses have strengths and weaknesses when it comes to managing you. And in truth the vast majority of managers fall somewhere between the worst and the great. They wish employees would manage themselves, but they realize that's not possible. They are stuck in some bad habits, but they can be drawn into better management habits. With these managers, you will earn dividends in exact proportion to the effort you put in.

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR BOSS

Low-performers are usually looking for a boss who is hands-off and treats every employee the same. They want a boss who doesn't know who is doing what where, why, when, or how—a boss who doesn't keep track and ignores performance problems. Low-performers want a boss who doesn't tell them what to do and how to do it, who doesn't spell out expectations every step of the way, who leaves them alone to hide and then collect the same paycheck as everyone else, regardless of their performance. Low-performers are the great beneficiaries of undermanagement. If that's you, then this is not a book you are going to like.

This book is written for people who want to be high-performers. In order to be a high-performer in today's workplace, you need to create highly engaged relationships with every boss, whether that boss is great, awful, or somewhere in between.

No matter who your boss may be on any given day, no matter what his or her style and preferences may be, there are four basics that you absolutely must take responsibility for getting from that boss:

1. Clearly spelled-out and reasonable expectations, including specific guidelines and a concrete timetable.
2. The skills, tools, and resources necessary to meet those expectations, or else an acknowledgment that you are being asked to meet expectations without them.
3. Accurate and honest feedback about your performance as well as course-correcting direction when necessary.
4. The fair quid pro quo—recognition and rewards—in exchange for your performance.

I know it's a huge shift for most people—and probably for you—to be highly engaged in an ongoing dialogue about your work with every single boss. Indeed, many participants in my *It's Okay to Manage Your Boss* seminars tell me, "Nobody has ever said this to me. You are giving me permission to help my manager manage me. You are giving me permission to get the support I need from my managers." Many participants tell me this is common sense: "Of course it's my responsibility to make sure I am working closely with any manager. Management relationships are two-way relationships." But half of the participants in my seminars say just the opposite (at the beginning, anyway): "You must be crazy. This contradicts most everything

I've ever read about 'managing up' and been taught in classes about how to advance my career."

And they are right. Very few people are saying what I am saying. Managing bosses in the real world is very, very difficult, and there are no easy solutions.

When I start talking about these hard realities in my training seminars, participants start listening carefully. When I tell them that I don't have any easy answers because easy answers work only in fantasyland, they start nodding. Then I promise them that I do have lots of very hard solutions that will take lots of guts, skill, time, and discipline to implement. All I do in my seminars is teach frustrated individuals to copy what the most effective boss-managers are actually doing every day. I've broken down my approach to real-world boss-managing into seven concrete steps. I refer to them as the seven steps back to the basics of managing your boss:

Step 1: The first person you have to manage every day is yourself.

Step 2: Get in the habit of managing your boss every day.

Step 3: Take it one boss at a time, one day at a time.

Step 4: Make sure you understand what is expected of you.

Step 5: Assess and plan for the resources you need.

Step 6: Track your performance in writing every step of the way.

Step 7: To earn greater credit and rewards, go the extra mile.

I've trained thousands of employees in the art of applying these steps to build and maintain strong, highly engaged working relationships with their managers. If you follow these seven

steps consistently and you still can't get what you need from your boss, then maybe your boss is truly a "jerk boss." I encourage you to read Chapter Nine of this book for advice on how to deal with that boss. But if you follow these steps every day, the more likely scenario is that you will succeed. I hear just about every day from people I've trained, and the word from the front line is that as a result of following these steps and working closer with their bosses, they are getting more work done better and faster, running into fewer problems, solving problems more quickly, wasting fewer resources, achieving greater success, and earning more credit and rewards for their effort.

Be the employee who says to every boss: "Great news! I'm going to take responsibility for my part of this management relationship. I know you are busy. I know you are under a lot of pressure. I'm going to help you by getting a bunch of work done very well, very fast, all day long. I'm going to work with you to make sure I understand exactly what you expect of me. On every task, I'm going to break big deadlines into smaller, concrete performance benchmarks. I'm going to learn standard operating procedures and use checklists. I'm going to keep track of everything I'm doing and exactly how I'm doing it. I'm going to help you monitor, measure, and document my performance every step of the way. I'm going to solve problems as soon as they occur, and if I come to you for your help, you'll know I really need you. I'm going to learn and grow and be able to take on more and more responsibility. Count on me. With your help, I'm going to be really valuable to you!"

It's okay to manage your boss. You just need to get really good at it.

