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Stop Complaining and Start Winning – Managing Up Is the Key to Your Success

“Once I gave up the hunt for villains, I had little recourse but to take responsibility for my choices . . . Needless to say, this is far less satisfying than nailing villains. It also turned out to be more healing in the end.”

—Barbara Brown Taylor

Let’s be clear: Managing up is not about brownnosing, sucking up, or becoming a sycophant. Managing up is about consciously and deliberately developing and maintaining effective relationships with supervisors, bosses, and other people above you in the chain of command. It is a deliberate effort to increase cooperation and collaboration in a relationship between individuals who often have different perspectives and uneven power levels. It is about consciously working with your boss to obtain the best possible results for you, your boss, and the organization.

Managing up is about *you* taking charge of *your* workplace experience. Here’s why it’s the key to your success.

Your Boss Matters

As much as we would love to believe that the work world is a meritocracy, where just being great at your job is all you need to succeed, reality tells a different story. The real (and inconvenient) truth is that your boss has a great deal of influence over your career success and trajectory. Your relationship with her, and her experience with you, will determine the kinds of opportunities that come your way in your organization. **Establishing strong, productive working relationships is the single most effective way to accelerate success in any organization.** Earn your boss's trust and good things come your way; incur your boss's ire and you may find yourself out of the running for promotions and opportunities. Long story short, your relationship with your boss can hurt or help you. It's up to you.

Your Boss Isn't Going to Change

People are who they are. Your boss isn't going to change who she is or how she operates just because you would prefer her to be different. Her personality got her where she is today; his approach has been approved by the powers above him. She believes her way works. He gets rewarded for his style of managing. Or the organization doesn't see the problem or doesn't have the stomach to address it. While you can't change who they are, you can change how you interact with them, and that's where *Managing Up* comes in. By understanding what makes them tick, you can adapt strategies to create a more robust relationship. You can't change how they deal with you, but you can change how you deal with them. In an ideal world, managers and leaders would adapt to their employees. They would use adaptive relationship-based methods to produce the best results. But the truth is that only 30 percent of managers use more than one style of managing; the rest don't bother. If you work for one of the 70 percent you may be waiting a long time for things to go your way at work with your manager. Why wait? The more effective strategy is, you guessed it, to practice adaptive strategies yourself. Or in other words, managing up.

Your Career Matters

Developing an effective relationship is as much *your* responsibility as theirs. Do not fall into the trap of "my boss should be . . ." or "my boss

ought to . . .” A bad or difficult boss is not an excuse for lack of effort on your part. It is *your* career that will suffer if you and your boss have a bad relationship. Your role in the relationship is to provide your boss with results and performance. You must learn the essence of good “followership.” *Managing Up* will teach you how to build effective relationships with your boss, which will put you in charge of your career. You can sit back and wait for your manager to change, or you can take action, manage up, and watch your career blossom.

Everybody Has to Manage Up, So Learn to Be Good at It

Most people, whatever their title or position, spend more time and energy reporting to people *above* them than having people report to them, so the ability to manage up is a critical component in your career success. Whether you are reporting to a supervisor, middle manager, VP, top executive, or a board of directors, managing up is a skill that will help you develop strong relationships, which will increase cooperation, collaboration, and understanding between those who have different power levels and perspectives. It’s not about brownnosing, schmoozing, or sucking up. It’s about developing robust relationships with the people who have enormous influence over your career. Being able to effectively manage up is good for you, good for your boss, and good for your organization.

Choice Is Empowerment

Managing up is not about blind followership. It’s about making strategic choices to obtain the best results for you, your boss, and the organization. It’s the win-win-win strategy. But in order to do this, you have to come from a place of choice, not from a place of victimhood. When confronted with any difficult situation you always have three choices:

- Change the situation. (We know this is almost impossible, since we can’t actually change other people and getting your boss fired is a long-term play.)
- Leave the situation. (Only you can decide when this is the best strategy, and sometimes it is.)
- Accept and adapt to the situation. (Learn to manage up!)

What isn't a choice is victimhood. Being a victim is completely disempowering. And it is a career killer and a soul killer. Don't kill your soul. It's hard to get it back.

Stop Waiting for the Unicorn and Start Working Well with the Boss You Have

Believe me, I wish bosses would be better. I wish that they would read and take to heart some of the lessons in those tens of thousands of books written on the subject. I wish that organizations would stop promoting people based on technical skills without considering their actual aptitude for managing people. I wish that bad managers would be fired. I wish that you could go to work every day and be energized, valued, inspired, and fulfilled. I also wish I could teleport myself anywhere I wanted to go. But that's not going to happen. So, unless you have a magic potion, stop waiting for the unicorn and start dealing with the boss you have. Start managing up.

Managing Up Will Make You a Better Leader

There. We've come full circle. The adaptive skills that you use to manage up will be many of the same skills you will use to manage down. If you can learn how to adapt to the needs and wants of others, to develop strong working relationships and develop win-win-win results by managing up, you will be much more equipped to do the same when you are a manager. If nothing else, you will learn what kind of manager you want to be and what kind of manager you don't want to be. Never waste the opportunity to learn from a difficult boss.

Objections to This Book

"Your Honor, I object!"

—Every lawyer in America

I know, I know. You have objections. People who resist managing up are full of objections. I've heard them all:

Objection 1: It's not fair.

My boss is the problem; why should I have to adapt to him? He should adapt to *me*. Yes. You are right. It's not fair. Completely and utterly not fair. But you know what else isn't fair? Life isn't fair. When given lemons, you can either sit back and suck on the sourness, bemoaning your fate, or you can take those lemons and make something out of them. Getting caught in the it's-not-fair trap is a mistake. The world is not a meritocracy and neither is the workplace. Learn to deal with it.

Objection 2: My boss needs to change, not me.

You will get no argument from me on that. I totally believe that your boss could and should learn to be a better boss. Your boss should take her job as boss seriously and do everything she can to be a boss who cares and develops her people. Your boss should understand and respect the enormity of her role. Your boss should read a book or two on being a great boss and then actually *be* a great boss. But guess what? You can't change your boss. All you can do is change your *reaction* to your boss. If your boss doesn't know how to manage people, then you have to learn to manage her.

Objection 3: Giving in only reinforces your boss's bad managerial ways.

Yes. You may be right. Adapting to your boss probably won't teach him anything about being a good boss. But neither will your animosity and resistance. As long as organizations and businesses continue to promote people based on technical skills and not people-management skills, then the odds of encountering ineffective management styles remain high. As long as organizations continue to promote people into management without providing adequate training and attention, we will have bad bosses. As long as organizations turn a blind eye to managers who crush souls, disengage employees, and ignore the importance of growing talent, we will have bad bosses. Until organizations start to place a premium on effective management styles and hold managers accountable for employee engagement, happiness, and retention, their ineffective ways will remain. So, if you work for an organization that doesn't hold managers accountable or for an organization that "doesn't get it," then please know: you can't change the culture of your organization; you can only change how you navigate it and respond to it.

Objection 4: Sucking up is for suckers

I reject the notion that managing up is the same as sucking up. I also reject the notion that sucking up is for suckers. That is misplaced pride talking. That is inflexibility talking. That is failure talking. Managing up is about adapting and building relationships. It is about learning what is important to your boss and making sure you give it to him or her – even when you think what they want is ridiculous (which it may very well be). Instead of viewing managing up as giving in or sucking up, view it as adaptive strategies for success. There is a big difference between being a spineless sycophant and being a strategic survivor and thriver. This book is about making strategic choices to help you excel, adapt, and succeed. It is not about being your boss's doormat. Excelling at managing up means keeping your ego in check and operating from a place of strategic choice, curiosity, experimentation, and openness.

Objection 5: It's the principle

Whenever I hear people defend their resistance on principle, I have to wonder. "It's the principle" usually means you are stuck on your own ego. If your boss is a discriminatory cheat or an abusive person, then you have to leave. Keeping yourself under his thumb based on "principle" is ridiculous. Unless the principle is about saving the lives of others, please know you aren't doing yourself any favors. I hope you use this book as a way to survive intact while you seek another job.

Objection 6: It's so phony!

Why should I change who I am? That feels inauthentic and fake! This objection always makes me sigh. Sigh. The thing about authenticity is that while most people think that it is a solitary action – e.g., being true to oneself or walking the talk – authenticity is actually a relational behavior. This means that to be truly authentic you must not only be comfortable with who *you* are, but you must be able to comfortably *connect* with *others* from that space.

My authentic self swears like a truck driver who hopes to be a sailor one day. Is it inauthentic when I resist dropping f-bombs during keynote speeches? No, it is not. My authentic self is extremely impatient. Am I being inauthentic when I politely allow someone to waste my time at Starbucks while they try to decide what to order?

No, it is not. My authentic self speaks rapidly and loudly. Am I being inauthentic when I slow my speech and modulate my volume? No, of course not. Authenticity is about spirit, energy, and personality. It's about bringing who you are everywhere you go. The key here is to bring the *best* of who you are everywhere you go. It's about choosing the behaviors that will allow your authentic self to successfully connect with other people. So, I save my f-bombs for friends who will appreciate them. I do my best to suppress my annoyance and impatience in public. And I try really hard to speak slowly enough for audiences who for some reason can't seem to understand my rapid speech. Being authentic does not mean you have to follow your every impulse or express every thought. It's about being in full choice about your actions. Take a cue from legendary Senate leader Mitch McConnell, who famously said, "I am the master of the unexpressed thought."

Objection 7: I can't believe you are telling me to be a patsy!

Let's be clear: This book is not about being a patsy. This book is about making choices that will enable you to thrive in the workplace. Never do anything illegal, immoral, or unethical. Whatever you decide to do, you must choose it.

I know. Some of you are thinking, "This woman is full of s**t. She's telling me to continue working for a toxic boss and just suck it up. She's an idiot." Okay, that is exactly the opposite of what this book is about. This book is about making an active choice for your career and work life. It's about not being a victim. It's about deciding what you are willing or not willing to do to be successful with your boss. It's about acting from a place of choice, *strategic* choice. And owning your choice.

If you decide you can't work for that toxic boss, then quit. And as quickly as you can manage. I'm behind you 100 percent. However, if you don't have the luxury to quit, then let's find a way to help you survive and maybe even thrive.

What I don't want you to do is to settle into victimhood. That place where you feel emotionally ravaged every day. That place where you are completely and totally emotionally and psychologically drained. That place where you have no options, no hope, and no joy. That place where you give away all your power. Because that is a bad place. That is the place where sickness and bad things happen to you mentally and

physically. That is the place of ultimate emotional, physiological, and mental toxicity. *Managing Up* will help you gain control and succeed. The choice is yours.

Time to Man Up

“Start where you are. Use what you have. Do what you can.”

—Arthur Ashe

“Man up” is my team’s internal shorthand for managing up. To man up is to take responsibility for your choices, actions, and attitudes. It’s about doing what needs to be done while keeping your integrity and values intact. It’s about taking charge of your own experience. It’s about not pointing the finger at others, but looking to see what you can do to help yourself.

In order to successfully man up, one must make a rigorous and honest analysis of the landscape of self and others. It’s a simple three-step process:

1. Assess Your Boss

Before you begin to manage up, you need to have a good sense of what you are managing up to. Take some time to piece together the puzzle that is your boss. Become a boss detective. Pay attention to clues she leaves. Notice who works well with your boss and how they interact with him. Look for patterns. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What is your boss’s workstyle personality? How does she interact with others?
- How does your boss like his information? How does she prefer to communicate?
- What are his priorities?
- What are her goals?
- What are his concerns, challenges, and pressures?
- What is her experience? How did she get to where she is?
- What is *his* boss like? What does the organization expect from her?
- How does he like to work?

- What does she expect from you? What are her expectations for the team?
- How much does she delegate? When, to whom, how does she delegate?
- What are his pet peeves?
- What truly matters to her?

See how many of these questions you can answer. Try to be objective and nonjudgmental. This is about gathering clues and assessing reality, not about judging. If you don't know the answers, then ask! Set up a meeting with your boss and find out. If your boss is unapproachable, ask others. It's not that hard to learn. It just takes a little effort.

2. **Assess Yourself**

The second step is a bit harder as it requires taking a good long, honest look in the mirror. Managing up requires being brutally honest with yourself in terms of who you are, what you want, and what you need. It's also about understanding your contribution to the equation. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What is my workstyle personality? How do I like to interact with others?
- How do I prefer to communicate?
- What are my priorities and goals?
- What do I really need to operate at my best? What are my non-negotiables?
- In what ways am I compatible with my boss? In what ways am I not?
- Is my boss really difficult or just difficult for me? Am I the only one struggling?
- What are my workplace strengths?
- What are my workplace weaknesses?
- Am I doing the job I was hired to do?
- Is my job a good fit for me?
- Do I bring the right attitude, energy, and motivation to be successful?
- Would I want myself as an employee?
- Do my coworkers think I am as great as I do?
- How am I contributing to the situation (for better or worse)?
- What am I resisting?

There are no right or wrong answers to the above questions. Only honest answers.

3. Assess Your Willingness to Man Up

Managing up is about deploying adaptive strategies, so in order to work, you must be willing to adapt. Remember, we can't change others, we can only change how we approach and interact with others. If you want your boss to adapt to you, you must be willing to adapt to her as well. Are you ready, willing, and able? Ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I like/love my job itself? Do I like/love my organization?
- Do I need this job (financially)?
- Do I need this job (for experience/career development)?
- Where am I on the scale of happiness/stress?
- Where is my boss on the scale of difficulty?
- What are the politics/organizational culture of my company? Is my boss a unicorn or is his/her style pretty indicative of the overall management style?
- Am I willing to make changes to my behavior and/or attitude?
- Am I willing to try to understand my boss?
- Do I want to thrive, solidify, or survive?
- Am I a victim?
- Can I man up? Is it worth the effort? Do I even want to try?

Remember, managing up is like putting together a puzzle. Part of the puzzle is your boss, part of it is you, and the rest of the pieces are the strategies you are willing or not willing to try. Some pieces will fit and some won't. Only you can figure out how to piece together the puzzle of your workplace experience.

Working with bosses often falls on what I call the continuum of difficulty. On the one end of the spectrum you have the Dream Boss. This is the person who totally gets you, respects you, and trusts you. You feel motivated, appreciated, and empowered. Working with this boss is a delight. You are super happy to come to work and you would do anything for this boss. In fact, you rarely think about managing up because the relationship feels natural and easy.

Scot over to the other end of this continuum and you will find the Nightmare Boss – the boss from hell. This is the boss whose behavior is beyond the pale. Working for this person is totally soul sucking.

You dread coming to work. You walk on eggshells in her presence. The very thought of him makes you furious. Your stomach is in knots. You are eating Tums like candy. You have lost all confidence, motivation, and self-respect. You come home from work every day exhausted and demoralized. Sunday evenings feel like the night before you are to report to prison. Some days you wonder if you aren't suffering from PTSD. You don't see any light at the end of the tunnel.

Between the Dream Boss and the Nightmare Boss lie a host of other manager experiences. Some bosses may be slightly difficult for you (like the merely annoying) and some may be more difficult for you (the utterly unbearable). Understanding where you are on the continuum can help you determine your course of action.

While we will discuss strategies for the Nightmare Boss in the *Truly Terrible* chapter, the majority of this book is intended to help those who are somewhere in the middle, those who can still see some light at the end of the tunnel. Those people who are willing to take action to shift their experience, improve their relationships, and move toward a happier experience at work.

For some people, this book will help you *thrive* with your boss. You will take a good or middling relationship and transform it into a great working relationship. For others, it may only help you *survive* until you find a new job or new boss. You will (hopefully) get enough strategies to keep your sanity and soul intact until you can get out. There is no magic bullet.

Once you have a good, honest assessment of the landscape at work, your boss's attitudes and behavior, where you are on the continuum of difficulty, and your own willingness, you can start to manage up and take charge.

Ready? Let's start at square one: Is your boss an innie or outie?

