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Managing Upwards

One of the common statements made to me is, "*I understand what you are saying Paul, but my boss would not allow me to do this*". It is a great frustration that many managers send their people on training and development activities and have no idea what the content is and how they can best support the individual when they return to work.

Many managers sit in frustration because their boss will not allow them to make a decision or take responsibility and act on it. The majority of middle managers I meet are faced with this issue and the whole business is held back as a result.

I believe that there becomes a time and need to manage upwards for many people. It may not always be possible to do some, or any of the points I will make, but I think that it will help some people deal with this issue on a regular basis.

Let us look at the boss and understand their fears. In many cases the boss is just incapable of letting go. It may not always be intentional but they have the habit of staying in control at some level. In many cases they need to stay in control at a certain level, but at the same time they may forget to which level they are comfortable in.

We are creatures of habit and it may simply be that the boss has not noticed that they are maintaining such a level of control. It has become a habit and they make decisions that you could make or control things that you could do for them. In these situations I recommend that you need to gently make them aware that you have enough experience now and maybe you could make their job easier if you were to now assume more responsibility.

It is important to note at this stage, when you ask to take more ownership for something, you need to be open to being able to provide feedback about progress. If the boss is going to let go, they will want to know that everything is working out (and that will require more than your verbal assurance) and that you will be monitoring your progress in a *'real'* way.

If you try to understand it from their point of view, they will have a sense of how things are working out and have a feel when intervention is needed. They are not sure that you have the same level of *'feel'*, or *'sense of being able to recognise'* that something may need adjusting, or require intervention. Also the boss wants to know that you will not try to hide issues if something is going wrong. They need reassurance that you will ask them for advice or support before it is too late.

The greatest fears a boss has are: that something will go wrong and they were not informed, or that they were kept in the dark and/or they will be held accountable for something that they simply did not know was a problem until it was too late. Any boss is desperate to know that the people that report to them will not *'drop them in it'*, due to lack of communicating what is happening.

So an important part of managing upward, and especially at the time of seeking to get the boss to let go, is to provide assurance. Frequent updates are one way of doing this. In addition, if you go to some bosses with a question (even if you know the answer) it is helpful because as it shows that you are willing to seek their advice.

Winning the confidence of the boss then takes us to the level where you can start to challenge. Maybe, you are in a position where, the way things have traditionally been done, need to be reconsidered. The boss may have always done it this way and it has worked this way for years!

If you need to challenge the way things are being done, it is important to do this from a position of respect. The message cannot be; that you think the old way of doing it is wrong, poor or inadequate. The truth is, it may have worked well at one time. If the approach is to undermine it in any way, it creates the impression that you do not recognise the value of it, or how it worked in the past. This will undermine your integrity, not build on it.

The approach needs to be one of recognising the value of the process or system in the past and then pointing out that it can be improved based on modern knowledge or ideas.

In summary, leading upwards requires you to be able to appreciate their position, their pressures and the points that they see as of most concern. It requires showing that you know the consequences of actions and can measure progress. That you will go to them before it is too late rather than leave things to get too bad. In essence it is about building your integrity with the boss so that they will feel comfortable to trust you.

Questions to consider are:

- How well do you understand the pressures your boss has and where they come from?
- What is important to your them?
- What do they want to see you capable of, before they can trust you?
- What do you do each and every day to build that integrity?
- Do you know the best approach to challenging your boss?
- Can you challenge whilst showing respect for the way things have been done in the past?

I hope these thoughts will be of use and the questions will help you to think of the best way to lead upwards.

Personally, I am a big believer in *'straight-forward'* communication and so it may be useful to just ask your boss; *"How do you want me to suggest ideas or challenge the way we do things in a positive manner?"*, or *"If I have an idea as to how we can improve the way we do things, how do you want me to explain my thoughts to you so that we can discuss them?"*.

Have a great month and thanks for all the many emails and calls. Your feedback and comments make it all worthwhile. Remember that you can also watch the presentation of 'Managing upwards' by going to my video blog or listen on my audio blog.

Best Wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul Biddle". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line that extends to the right.

Paul