

PAPER  
28

---

## Managing upwards

---

Bob Dick (2003) *Managing upwards: a workbook*.  
Chapel Hill: Interchange (mimeo).

Originally written in 1992 as part of a communication skills workbook and revised several times since.

### Introduction

The relationship you will focus on in these worksheets is the relationship between you and someone in authority — a boss. There may not be anyone you think of as a boss. But any relationship where a power difference exists can also be used as a vehicle for the practice.

I think your analysis will demonstrate the way in which relationships are influenced by all people concerned. Any change of behaviour on the part of one person has an influence on the relationship, and hence usually on the behaviour of the other person.

I also wish to raise the issue of ethics, and in a practical way. Attempting to change a relationship introduces important ethical issues. I believe that your values are your concern, at least until they directly affect me. That is why I wouldn't presume to tell you how you should or shouldn't behave. In any event you may very well disagree with my value position on many issues. Situations

involving power relationships often make some of the ethical issues apparent. Having drawn them to your attention, I leave it to you to consider them in other situations.

The more immediate purpose of the early part of this workbook is to help you to analyse a relationship. You will thus be better equipped to change that relationship if you decide to do so.

At this stage, however, you are not being asked to try to change the relationship. All you will do is to analyse it in an attempt to understand what you presently contribute, or could contribute, to the other person's behaviour within that relationship.

Before I proceed, I wish to acknowledge some valuable help from my colleagues. Many of the ideas in this section of the workbook were originally worked out in collaboration with George Blackgrove. Some of the ideas were developed in courses I used to run in conjunction with John Damm, and in conversations with Jim Hirsch. I have also made use of some material which Ron Passfield modified from a session on managing upwards which I conducted.

## **Improving relationships upward**

The management consultant Peter Drucker has said in his film *Managing upwards* that part of a subordinate's task is to enable her boss to perform. Drucker also believes that a boss's task is to enable her subordinates to perform.

Those interesting thoughts provide the theme for this exercise. In it you will prepare for a possible later conversation in which you and your boss (or some other authority figure) will try to improve your working relationship.

Whether that conversation takes place is entirely up to you. This exercise is preparation only. The exercise assumes your boss will respond positively to

---

your attempt to improve your working relationship with her. Most subordinates suspect this isn't true. Most who attempt this exercise find that it is. But it's your choice what to do about it. For now, I suggest you do the preparation, and then see how you feel about it. A following exercise deals with more difficult bosses.

## **Part 1**

The first part of the exercise may help to make it easier for you to understand better your boss's point of view on some issues. To do this, you will examine your relationship with your subordinates.

If you do not have any work experience there are other relationships you can analyse. Any relationship within which you have some power, and some responsibility for other people, will suffice. Examples include teacher, parent, informal leader of a social group, older brother or sister to a younger sibling, baby-sitter, and so on.

1. Make a list of things that your subordinates do that annoy you. If you have trouble compiling the list, think of each of your subordinates in turn.
  2. For each of the actions, list how you often react.
-

Now you will analyse some aspects of your relationship with a boss. Before proceeding with the exercise, decide which relationship you are going to analyse.

Any relationship where a power difference exists is suitable. If you work, or have worked, and have a boss, your choice is easy. If not, you may instead analyse your relationship with some other person who has some power or authority in their dealings with you. It could be one of your parents, perhaps, or a teacher, or the informal leader of some social group you belong to, or the president of a voluntary group of which you are a member.

The relationship you  
are going to analyse:

In what follows, try to keep in mind what it is like to be a boss. If your boss isn't present (and most probably is not), you will have to keep one eye on her interests throughout the exercise.



6. Part of your responsibility within that relationship is to "enable your boss to perform", Drucker would say. In the light of lists 3 and 4, what three or four things do you think you can do (or do differently) to make the most of your boss's particular strengths and weaknesses?

It is now time to consider your own strengths and weaknesses, and what your boss can help you do about them.

7. What do you do best in your job?  
Which of your responsibilities do you meet best?
  8. What do you do least well? Which of your responsibilities are you least able to meet?
  9. Choose the most important items in lists 7 and 8. Mark them, for example by underlining.
  10. What three or four things could your boss do (or do differently) to help you to perform better in your job?
-

11. Your boss, I would guess, is unlikely to do those things if you just wait for them to happen. How can you best approach your boss to enlist her cooperation in the matters listed above?
-

### Part 3

12. Which of your colleagues (siblings, peers, fellow students, or whatever) seems to have the best working relationship with your boss?
  13. On what occasions do you and your boss have the most effective working relationship?
  14. What do your answers to these two questions imply about the type of relationship your boss feels most comfortable with, and works most effectively within?
  15. Which of your colleagues (etc.) seems to have the worst working relationship with your boss?
  16. On what occasions do you and your boss have the least effective working relationship?
  17. What does this imply about the type of relationship your boss doesn't feel comfortable with?
  18. Consider your responses to the questions in this part of the exercise. What can you do differently to enable you to build the sort of working relationship that seems to be effective for your boss?
-



## Part 4

In the fourth part of the exercise, you will consider the items you have chosen above in more detail. What issues is it useful to approach your boss about? How can you approach her to maximise the chances of success?

19. You have used a number of methods to identify things you could do to improve your working relationship with your boss. Gather them together here, arranged in your order of priority for them. Include only those items where you might be prepared to make the first approach.
  
  20. Consider each of the items in turn, beginning with the most important of them. Remember that your attempts to predict your boss's likes and dislikes may not be very accurate—it may be all fantasy on your part. Plan how you could approach your boss about each item, acknowledging that you may be mistaken about it, and trying not to put your boss on the spot about it.
  
  21. Choose the one issue which seems most promising. Rehearse, with a friend, the approach you would use to approach your boss about one of these issues. (continued overleaf →)
-

During your rehearsal, keep in mind the key points from earlier exercises. In particular ...

- Before you start, focus on your own state of mind. Deliberately relax. Try to maintain the state of relaxation throughout the practice session.
  - Try to stay future oriented, and non-defensive. See if you can make it a joint problem solving session.
  - Attend closely to your boss. When she is speaking, listen to understand her position.
  - If it becomes apparent that there are issues about which your boss feels keenly, give priority to them. But do so in a way which enables you to return to your own issue when your boss's issues are resolved.
-

## Changing a relationship with a boss

In the previous exercise it was assumed that your boss would respond positively to your approach. Occasionally, this is clearly not true, or the risk is too great to attempt to do something about it. A relationship, however, is just that—a relationship. Any change in the behaviour of either person will change it.

Other people's behaviour is often partly the result of how we reward and punish what they do and say. One very effective way of changing a relationship is to stop rewarding behaviours you don't want, and to start rewarding behaviours you do want. In this exercise, you will explore the rewards and punishments your boss earns with her behaviour. You will then use this information to decide what you can do about it. The method of analysis you will use is a variation on *Option 1<sup>1</sup>/2*, discussed elsewhere.

1. Make a list at the right of things your boss does that interfere with your work effectiveness, or your satisfaction, or both.

Think back to the previous exercise, and include items from it.

Make the list as long as you can in the time you have.

---

2. Now look back over the list, and choose the most promising item. Take the following aspects into account ...
    - How specific is the item? A specific item is easier to analyse. If there isn't a specific item perhaps you can use a single example of one of the items you have listed.
    - How representative is it of a wider class of items?
    - How important? (Important enough to be worth doing something about?)
    - Is it an item where you think you have some chance to improve matters?
  
  3. Take the most important item, and write it as a specific description of your boss's behaviour, and your reaction. For example "I get annoyed when my boss ...[i.e. does or says some specific thing on some specific occasion]".  
  
(The rest of the space below is for a later step.)
-

4. Now give a specific description of what you would prefer your boss to do instead: "On these occasions, I would prefer my boss to ...".

(The rest of the space below is for a later step.)

In questions 5 and 6 below, it is an advantage if some friends or colleagues can help you compile the lists, whether they know your boss or not. If you use help, however, it has to be your own judgment as to which is the most important of these.

5. Return now to the behaviour you would like to change. In the space beneath question 2, list:
- the advantages to your boss of doing that; and
  - the disadvantages to your boss of instead doing what you would prefer.
6. Consider all the items you have listed. Mark (by underlining or circling) those you think are most important in determining your boss's present behaviour.
7. Now, beneath question 3, list the following:
- the advantages to your boss of doing what you would prefer; and
  - the disadvantages to your boss of what she does now.
8. Again, circle or underline the items you think are, or could be, most important from your boss's point of view.
-

9. Examine the two lists of advantages and disadvantages. These are the rewards and penalties which probably help to determine your boss's behaviour. As a partial check on your lists (which may be all fantasy), ask yourself this question. Is it now apparent why your boss does what she does, and not what she does not? If so, move to the next step.

If it is not apparent, then you have left something out of your analysis, or you have misjudged the importance of some of the items. Reconsider. It may help to remember that the most powerful rewards and penalties: (a) are immediate in time; (b) are important to the person concerned; (c) are usually invisible, involving the person's ego and consisting of feelings.

10. Now we come to the crunch. One way to change your boss's behaviour is to change the rewards and penalties that influence her behaviour. Look back over the items listed under question 2.

Which of these can you reduce or eliminate (the easiest ones to start on are those which you provide directly).

Transfer them to the space on the right.

Remember that your boss reacts not to the world as it is, but to the world as she sees it. It is therefore enough if there is something you can do to change her perception of the advantages and disadvantages.

11. Now do a similar analysis of the items listed beneath question 3. Transfer to the space on the right the advantages and disadvantages which you can increase through your own behaviour.
-

12. Convert the items in the previous questions into things you can do or say to change the rewards and penalties for your boss. (If you don't do something about it, the changes won't take place!)
13. Consider your plan of action. If you carry it through, is it likely to make enough change in the rewards and penalties to change your boss's behaviour. If so, move onto the next question.

If not, you will have to settle for something less. Revise your description of your behaviour into something that is achievable: "I would settle for having my boss [do or say this ...]". Then repeat the analysis.

14. Now for some final checks to sharpen up your plan of action:
    - What assumptions have you made. How can you check them before proceeding?
    - If you were the boss, and someone did that to you, how would you react? (Now, do you want to revise your approach?)
    - If you do it as planned, what can go wrong? What can you add to your plan to prevent it going wrong? If it still goes wrong despite your efforts, what can you do to recover from it? (You can use the space below as a worksheet, if you wish.)
-

## Some final thoughts

Here, phrased as questions and tentative answers, are some of the issues involved in managing upwards.

*Isn't it risky to try to change someone with more power?* Yes. But that doesn't mean you can't do anything about it. Firstly, power is a quality of a relationship. It is therefore something you give to someone. You can, to some extent, take some of it back. Secondly, some of the power your boss uses is bluff. Like playing poker, the only way you can find out how much is real is to be prepared to call the bluff. Occasionally you'll be mistaken. That's where the risk lies. At the least, you can usually make your own views and preferences known ...

*"I would prefer not to do that. I would find it easier to do it with enthusiasm if I understood why it's important to you."*

*Is managing upwards manipulative?* It can be. If you do not reveal your intentions and motivations, probably it is. If you let your boss know what you intend to do, and why, it probably isn't manipulative (but may be more risky).

*"You have supported only one of my suggestions in the previous six months. I'm willing to be persuaded I'm mistaken, but I personally believe that many of my suggestions are worth your support. I'm considering looking for ways of taking the suggestions further myself. I'd prefer your approval. I think the ideas are good enough to warrant action without your approval. Can we talk the issue through?"*

*Won't it damage my relationship with my boss?* It will most probably make it awkward at the beginning. If you are not manipulative, and you use good listening skills when they are needed, I would expect it to improve most relationships in the intermediate and long term.

*Does it have to be done face-to-face?* Perhaps not. But face-to-face is the only way, it seems to me, to get all the non-verbal information you need. Face-to-face is also more flexible. It allows you to adjust more readily to your boss's needs and

---



ideas, and to achieve a mutually-satisfactory outcome. Under some circumstances, you may be required to make your proposal in writing. In such instances, it makes good sense to sort it out face-to-face first. When you understand what the issues are, what your boss wants out of it, and so on, you can then commit it to writing.

*But once the boss has decided something, won't challenging it just make her more determined?* Probably, especially in bureaucratic organisations. Here's a simple groundrule for managing upwards. In general, don't waste much time or effort on a decision that has already been taken. Fight the next decision, not the last one. Good managing upwards, like much of effective communication, is future oriented.

*"I'm not asking you to revise your decision. However, I would like to point out to you how much difficulty the decision created for me."*

*When it comes to the point, doesn't my boss have the right to demand that I do what she wants?* That's for you to decide. I believe so, except where it goes strongly against your conscience. I don't think the right extends to asking you to pretend to like it.

*"I accept that you have a right to ask me to do that. As you insist, I'll do it as well as I can. I have to say that I'm still not convinced it's the best way. If it were my decision, I'd do it differently."*

*What if there is nothing I can do to change the rewards and penalties?* This is occasionally true. All you can do then is to learn to live with it. Usually, though, you can at least tell your boss what the costs are for you. In that way, you make her bear some of the costs of her behaviour. Often we reward our bosses for making our life unpleasant — we pretend to be pleased to work overtime, or do what they have asked, or to be told how to do our job.

*Isn't it all very time-consuming and involved?* Yes. It helps to remember that it is your decision whether or not to do anything about it. If you don't, then I

---

presume you are willing to continue to put up with the present situation. It also helps to remember that, in any event, all you are trying to do is to make one small change in your own behaviour. For I think that that is all that anyone can do.