

Are You Making the Most of Your Boss?

It's not uncommon for middle managers—particularly those newly promoted—to be so focused “down” on the work at hand that they under-utilize the relationship with their boss.

This is understandable because with the promotion to middle management, strong performers bring with them what they know from being an individual contributor and/or team member. They've got expertise at doing what their direct reports now do. Their competence lies in managing that world of work. Unfortunately, if that continues to be the frame of reference, the approach to the relationship with the boss may remain mostly transactional – *she wants X, I deliver X*.

Managers stuck in that mindset under-utilize an important relationship in their professional network. Of course, no two bosses are the same so whether they have a great, so-so or really mediocre supervisor will have an impact on how much they can add value and get value from the relationship. Regardless, there's likely something they can do to leverage the value of the working relationship for both parties.

Paradoxically, they can start by looking at their own direct reports. How might their subordinates add value to their own role of being the boss? If their team was looking up, rather than down, what might they notice about the middle manager's role, position, competing priorities and pressures? What might they notice about the trends and needs of the department? Or pressures from outside the organization? How might they bring value to the relationship in a way that would help the middle manager do his job better? Could the manager use some honest feedback on his own work? How might the team show up differently so that the manager is better able to help them realize their full potential?

Now the middle manager can ask how he might do the same things for his boss? Is there something he could bring to his interactions with his boss that would help her do her job better? Not only the job of managing but *all* the myriad responsibilities, priorities, and petty annoyances she is juggling.

How can the middle manager engage in strategizing, brainstorming, workforce planning, and problem solving with his boss in ways that help her but also provide him with a more expanded view of her role and the entire organization?

Even more valuable may be having the conversations that take real courage. Is there some feedback that the senior boss would benefit from? Is there an elephant in the room that no one else on the team has acknowledged? Is there some process or conflict getting in the way of excellent work and organizational performance?

Some middle managers feel squeamish about engaging their boss in a way that appears overly eager or even manipulative. After all, the suggestion here is to intentionally broaden and deepen the conversation and relationship with the person who has potential to mentor, coach, train and provide a recommendation for the next move.

The important distinction here is *intention*. This is not simply about getting on the boss's good side for one's own advantage. It's about genuinely seeking to understand the boss's needs, priorities and challenges so that managers can be of greater service to the boss, their own teams and the organization.