Managing Upward
(Tactics for Capturing the Boss' Attention)

It was Friday morning, and I had just returned to my cubicle from our regular Production Planning meeting. Typically, these meetings were difficult and stressful since every single job going through our manufacturing plant was reviewed, and if the job presented any problem to the schedule, which ever department responsible for the delay was expected to explain the problem and offer a solution. In fact, if any of us got out of that meeting without confrontation with the big boss, we were happy to escape unharmed.

When I arrived at my desk, Earl was already there, waiting. The look on his face told me to approach him carefully. Without any small talk he got right to the point. "I give up! I don't know how you do it! You made three suggestions to the boss in today's meeting and the boss accepted them all! I have made those exact same suggestions multiple times and the boss never even considered them let alone implemented them. What's your secret?"

It is not uncommon at Learning Dynamics to have our clients relate similar situations with us that sound like that question posed by Earl. At the time, I didn't have an answer because I'd never thought about it before. But research and experience bring us to some pretty pragmatic explanations and potential solutions.

Learn to Speak the Boss' Language

The manager's mindset is usually pretty well defined and evident if we're paying attention. Employees who have been successful at managing upward have often found a way to shift their language to key words and ideas that are already within the manager's attention span. Is the boss focused on time and schedule, or budget and costs, or the competition, or the company's reputation? Almost any situation the employee would like to discuss with the manager can be approached from one of those areas. Too often, employees approach the manager with concerns of their own. While those concerns are entirely appropriate, if the employee can present them in the language that is relevant and currently topical for the manager, then the employee has a far greater likelihood of capturing the manager's ear.

If you were the boss, and two supervisors approached you with the following comments, which would command more of your attention and generate a desire for more dialogue?

Comment 1:
"These staff reductions are killing me! How can I hit the targets we agreed on when those targets were based on staffing numbers far different than we have now?

(OVER)

Those targets need to be reduced to more realistic numbers if we're going to continue with these staffing restrictions."

Comment 2:

"These staff reductions may be a serious problem down the road. We've made the adjustments required for now but I am very concerned about sustaining progress for the longer haul. It may make sense for us to review our targets if these staffing numbers will be in place for a while. I'd be happy to create a couple of scenarios projecting the future for your review and discussion."

Those comments offer two approaches to the same problem, but otherwise are very different. Let's see why Comment 2 has the greater chance for additional dialogue with the boss concerning the staffing issue.

- Comment 2 is presented more as a solution to the problem, with a longer view approach. Typically the manager's mindset is more future-oriented than the current view of getting the job done today. Many managers view the day-to-day, here-and-now work to be the responsibility of the supervisor.

- Comment 1 is more in the form of a complaint without any solution offered other than altering the targets to help the supervisor hit his/her numbers.

- Comment 2 offers a pathway to more discussion. It offers the manager reassurance that the immediate work is being handled. It also offers a suggestion for new or projected data to review the problem in a proactive manner.

Managing upward is somewhat of an art form, and some people are inherently better at it than others. With a bit of analysis and strong listening skills, employees can discern what the manager worries about. If employees can do that successfully, then they can increase the likelihood that the manager will see them as allies in solving problems.

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