

August 2008

The Desired Outcome

This Month: Managing your Boss

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YOUR BUSINESS

Is your boss on your side?

Recently I've had a lot of questions that I would describe as – "What should you do when you have the feeling that your boss is just not on your side - when it seems like your boss does not value you, is working against you, is making you go slower, or generally blocking you?"

Three specific situations:

1. Your boss doesn't seem to value who you are and what you offer
2. Micro-managing and wanting too much detail
3. They block your visibility and ability to network

1) Getting your boss to value what you uniquely offer:

Everyone would like to be using all their strengths in their work, and feel appreciated for them. People want to be recognized for the broad set of skills they offer, but some managers seem to be entirely focused only on narrow set of tactics and deliverables. It's frustrating.

Give them what they need first.

If you are on the hook for an outcome or a deliverable, a product, a sales quota, a business deal, etc., a tactically focused boss is never going to want to hear about anything else until the deliverable is delivered.

Your strategic ideas and suggestions for additional value-add will fall on deaf ears, and potentially even make matters worse for you, if you come across as not being focused enough on the deliverable.

First, do a complete and excellent job on whatever it is your boss is counting on, and THEN have the more strategic discussion.

Once you have satisfied the tactical need, then you can talk about additional value add, your broader strengths, your ideas for improving the organization or your development plan, and your boss will be more ready to hear it.

Be very focused about learning what is most important to your manager, how they think about the business, what keeps them up at night, and then position your additional ideas to be specifically aligned with something they already care about.

If you have a broader and more strategic view of the business than your manager does, there may be ego problems at work too. If it always seems like you are "teaching" your manager things they don't know, and they

are not open to it, you will have trouble getting your ideas across.

Here it helps to bring in information from the outside -- from customers, from surveys, from other organizations. That way the discussion is focused on real data, vs. being your experience or opinion vs. theirs. People are almost always open to real data from the outside.

2) Getting your boss's focus off the detail

Some bosses just can't let go of the detail as they advance. This is a problem for all involved, them, you, and the organization. But this is pretty common. And it is frustrating for a few reasons.

1. It makes you feel like you are not trusted
2. It makes you feel like you are seen as not competent if you don't have command of the detail
3. It wastes a lot of time to collect, manage, and discuss detail that is not adding value to what you are doing.

Focus on outcomes

If your boss always demands more detail than you know is productive, you need to be the one to change the agenda.

The most effective thing you can do is get the conversation focused on outcomes.

When you get asked about detail say, "Yes, I will cover that, but before we get into the detail, can we review our desired outcomes on this project so that I can make sure that the detail is tracking to your expectations for the success of the project?"

You will find that this approach will remove the emotion from the discussion and feel instantly productive to both of you.

Spend as much time as possible focused on discussing the outcome.

Sometimes if you can get a desired outcome clearly agreed, you can say something like, "Do you trust me to go away and deliver this outcome? If so, here is what I propose we review at our next meeting"

You change the communication/review process -- define what's important

Then you can proactively recommend the content and the level of the next discussion.

Sometime bosses require more detail because they don't know what else to ask for! If you can show a more valuable way to structure the working/review relationship focused on outcomes, you may be surprised that your boss will back off on the detail. This has been my personal experience.

If you are not proactive about what you will review, you will leave yourself in the position to react to whatever your boss asks for. Change the game.

Show your detail-addicted boss more valuable, high-impact things to worry about.

Sometimes boss's require detail because they just find it entertaining, or they have a personal need to feel like they can get as detailed as anyone in the whole organization.

I personally don't believe that this adds value. I believe that this type of behavior will limit their own upward progress, but if you've got a boss like this, then find a way to entertain them.

Again, be proactive. Try creating opportunities for your boss to review details with people on your team. This is also a great way to accomplish getting your boss connected with your team as discussed in the [article below](#)

By satisfying their need for detail with the people who should be worrying about the detail, you leave room for yourself to operate a higher level, and show your value by driving the project forward in a more productive and meaningful way.

You can read some more ideas about dealing with being micro-managed in a past article: [You Can't Blame Your Failure on the Fact that your Boss is Stupid](#).

Getting your visibility and ability to network unblocked

I often talk about the critical importance of developing relationships with your boss's boss and your boss's peers.

If you have a boss that feels threatened by this and blocks it that makes it harder, but you can't give up.

Your career will suffer without this level of visibility.

These introductions are something your boss should happily offer you if you are a top performer. If you feel like you are getting blocked, this might be an occasion to check and make sure you are a top performer! This is not something one does for low performers.

If you confirm that you are considered a top performer and your boss is still blocking you, you need to find a way to make these important connections without threatening your boss.

I never recommend going around your boss by taking a disagreement or a non-agreed business agenda to a higher level. You never win against your boss.

This is simply about positive visibility:

Here are a few things I have done that have worked.

1) Give direct feedback on something public the person did.

Just a quick email saying, "I enjoyed the talk you gave. The part that was particularly useful/meaningful/inspiring to me was ..."

You would be surprised how few pieces of positive feedback executives get! It will stand out. You will most likely get a quick email response thanking you, and then you have cracked the door open.

If you send a short meaningful email or feedback a few times a year, that executive will know your name and have a positive image of you. This is a huge improvement over being completely unknown.

2) Find project that is highly visible to the person you want to connect with.

Most executives are pretty vocal about what projects, initiatives, or business areas they care most about. If you can find a project that aligns with your desired outcome, and is in an area being closely watched, it is a good opportunity to get positive visibility.

You would need to get your boss to support your taking on the extra work, so do this in the context of the business need first and your development plan second. And then make sure you do a really good job!

3) Look for a non-work content reason to connect

This one can be tricky because you don't ever want to be perceived as being annoying. When people try to get visibility by stalking executives it often backfires. So don't follow them into the bathroom, or try to have a business discussion at a party, or go to meetings just to be seen.

But if you pay attention to what executives say publicly, you may find they have an interest in a particular, sport,

art, dining experience, hobby, etc. If you can find a way to offer something of genuine value, a pointer to something they may not have discovered yet, a new idea about their interest, that is a great way to make a connection.

Since all of these are best done in the category of asking for forgiveness, not permission, it's important to make sure you pick an approach that it is not threatening to your boss.

If your boss were to find out about it, the worst you would want them to think is that it was an un-approved communication, that you can down-play as not having any business impact whatsoever, so you didn't want to waste their time, etc.

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YOUR PEOPLE

Connect your boss with your team

One of the most important things you can do as a manager is to connect your boss with your team.

The benefits of this are significant, let me see if I can think of ten:

1. Your team gets visibility for the work they do
2. You get a chance to showcase your star performers with your boss.
3. You get visibility for the work your team does
4. You get visibility for recruiting, retaining and growing rising stars
5. Your team gets a better understanding of how what they do fits into the bigger picture
6. Your team is more motivated because they do not feel "lost" in the organization.
7. Your boss can reinforce difficult decisions you are making
8. Your boss can answer questions directly, and your team will feel like they are "in the know"
9. You give your top performers better access to make personal connections at a higher level, so they will love you for that.
10. You get leadership points from both your boss and your team.

This is one of the most important things you can do as a leader of your team. Here's how I do it.

First I get my boss to agree to spend 1 hour per quarter with my team, and I get it on the calendar ahead of time. I re-arrange my staff meetings a little if necessary to make sure the dates line up.

Over the quarter I collect question about things that I think my team would want to know from my boss.

A few days prior to the meeting I give my boss a prep document or a script that has the following content:

1. Thank you for your hard work on [a specific list of things]
2. Thank you particularly to [specific people to be recognized]
3. I want to let you know how important the work your team does is to the rest of the organization;
 - ◆ Point 1
 - ◆ Point 2
 - ◆ Point 3
4. I want to review the overall strategy with you and give you updates about how we are doing
5. I want to reinforce the fact that [this particular initiative you are working on] is critical to our meeting our business goals.
6. Likely questions from the team and suggested answers

Don't expect your boss to just come in and naturally say and do all the

right things. Script it!

Your boss will likely not even know the answers to all of these things. This invitation and this script gives you a chance to make sure your boss does know how valuable your team is and how it supports the bigger strategy he cares about.

Developing this script is also an important thought exercise for you to get clear on how think and talk about how what your team does fits into the bigger company strategy.

Your team, hearing this from you, and then hearing the same thing from your boss will build a level of trust in the organization that is beyond what you can do on your own. And trust makes everything go smoother and faster.

The real point here is that even if your boss is not someone you are proud of, getting him/her connected to your staff pays big dividends. I can tell you that I have seen this in my own organizations where one manager did a great job of this, and his team was motivated and felt supported and connected, and another manager never invited me to his meetings and his team was unmotivated, and felt disconnected and worried.

Which team would you want? You can get the first one if you connect your team and your manager in a very purposeful way.

And don't forget, if you have a boss that wants too much detail as discussed [above](#) you can use these interactions with your team to satisfy that.

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YOUR VISIBILITY

What to ask for

This is always a topic of big discussion in my career building workshops because people want not only to learn things for themselves, but also get tools to become a better leader of their team. So as you read this think about not only asking your boss for these things, but also giving them to your top performers.

One thing you need to be comfortable with is differentiating performance. The worst thing you can do for your top performers is treat them like everybody else. These suggestions are the things you should reserve for your top performers, and therefore, you need to make sure you are top performer if you want your boss to do them for you.

I will put them in three categories:

1. Development
2. Visibility
3. Compensation

Development:

Specific Development Opportunities

It is important to take your development into your own hands. I will write more about this in an upcoming column called *Making the Right Experience*.

Your boss should be interested in your development and willing to help you, but you can't expect him/her to come up with the plan for you. You need to have a specific desired career outcome, research what is necessary to get the kind of job you want, and then create a list of projects and opportunities which will support that.

Then when you go to your boss to ask for help with your development, you can ask for something specific - "will you support me taking on this project, will you sponsor me to work on this team in this other organization for 3

months”, etc.

Best case is if there is some part of your boss’s job that is not getting done, and that work aligns with your desired outcome. Then you can offer to take some work off your boss’s plate.

Think about how much you would like it if your employees all came to you with their long term goals and their development ideas mapped out so all you needed to do was help them clarify which is best and support something specific vs. “come up with a development plan”.

Career development belongs in the hands of the individual. Handle yours and ask your boss for specific support. Expect from and offer the same to for your top performers.

Mentors

In past article on [Mentors](#) I talked about why you need them, and in a future column I will talk more about how you get them and what to do with them.

But for now, this is a great thing to ask your boss to help with. Your boss has access a level or two up in the company. Discuss your goals and ask if you can get an introduction to a potential mentor at his peer’s or boss’s peers level in another organization.

Again, this is absolutely something you should be doing for your top performers too.

Visibility

Network Introductions: Your boss also has a personal/professional network that is different than yours. When you are working on a project, always ask, do you know someone who has done something similar? and could you make an introduction for me to get some best practices? This is a fantastic way to build your network.

Peer introductions:

Your boss’s peers are a special category of the network of influencers and stakeholders you need to connect to.

Your boss’s peers have a big influence on what happens to you. At your boss’s staff meeting they will have discussions about “who are the top performers in our organization?” or who do you think we should be considering for this promotion?

If none of your boss’s peers know you, you will not fare well in these discussions. I have seen very talented (unknown) people get swept aside in this discussion as the group gets focused on the people they know better, and are therefore more comfortable with.

You need to get to know your boss’s peers, either through direct introductions, suggesting reasons to connect with them directly, or going to the staff meeting your boss goes to.

Go to the staff meeting with your boss: If you prepare stuff for your boss to take into his/her staff meeting, ask if you can go there to present it yourself. This is a great way to create visibility and familiarity with your bosses peers.

But this should not completely substitute for creating a direct relationship with a couple of them

Compensation: Don’t forget to have the compensation discussion.

1. Have the conversation
2. Keep the discussion focused on business outcomes
3. Don’t expect your boss to remember your details.

You should be discussing your compensation with your boss a minimum of once/year and a maximum of twice per year.

It is important to keep the discussion focused on business outcomes. Make sure you always have an agreed set of objectives you are working toward for the year, and an understanding of what meeting or over-achieving them means in terms of compensation.

So much stress is created and time wasted on both ends if this communication isn't happening regularly. If you sign up for a big high-risk, high-impact workload and don't have the discussion around "If I meet these goals, how will the company value that in terms of my compensation", you may spend a year working hard thinking that your effort will be rewarded with a big raise, promotion, or bonus, while your boss may perceive it as business as usual.

Once the tasks are accomplished, review them and get feedback. Don't expect your boss to remember all your details. Keep records of your conversations, remind him/her of where you stand.

If some form of compensation was agreed based upon what you delivered, once you have verified that your boss agrees you delivered it, ask for the compensation.

Don't assume it will happen automatically.

I learned this lesson when I was *expecting* to get a big raise based on over-achieving my goals, and when I specifically asked for it, my boss smiled and said, "I wasn't going to give it to you if you didn't ask!"

I wrote more about how to ask for what you want in in the article [How to get that raise or promotion](#)

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YOUR LIFE

What you can and can't live with?

OK, one big caveat. So far I've been talking about bosses which are mostly OK or good. Maybe annoying, not as supportive, articulate or inspiring as you'd like, but at least OK.

There are some bosses out there that have genuine psychological disorders. Somehow these people climb the ladder into top management and many create significant success, either in spite of or because of their psychology.

If you are unfortunate to have ended up working for one of these people, here are a few things to consider.

What this personality typically looks like:

Your boss:

- ✦ Flies off the handle and becomes abusive for no apparent or logical reason
- ✦ Demands lots of time and attention from others even if it is not productive
- ✦ Relates to people/performance through personal attacks vs. business results
- ✦ Completely closed to reason/change/internal self discovery

If you have a boss like this you need to first realize that they will not change.

No amount of logic, focus on desired outcomes, feedback or business arguments will make it better. Your strategy needs to be to accept the fact that they will not change and find a way to take care of yourself.

So you need to decide what you can and can't live with.

Is either the experience or the money specifically supporting your

defined desired outcome?

If not – move on, there is no useful reason to endure it.

If it is, consider if this situation is making you miserable outside of work too? It's OK to hate your job for awhile if it is serving your desired outcome, but it is not OK to hate your life.

If you choose to stay in this situation, make sure you have a plan to take care of yourself.

- ✦ Clearly define for yourself what good or beneficial things you are receiving from this situation.
- ✦ Clearly define the things that you find harmful TO YOU.
- ✦ Develop strategies to minimize the harm to yourself.

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I hope you have found some useful ideas that will help you do something specific to build value in your career and business and enjoy your life.

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About Patty

Patty Azzarello was the youngest general manager at HP ever at the age of 33. She ran a \$1B software business at the age of 35 and was a CEO for the first time at the age of 38. Patty is known for her personal leadership qualities, her straightforward and practical manner, and her genuine interest in making a real connection with people to help them to advance their career and business, and to find ways to enjoy their life more.

[More About Patty >>](#)

Today Patty Azzarello is the CEO of Azzarello Group, www.AzzarelloGroup.com a unique services organization focused on helping companies develop and motivate their top performers and grow their business.

Azzarello Group delivers practical, experience-based tools, through products and services including, executive coaching, public speaking, leadership workshops, online programs, and consulting with teams on business execution.

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