



**DON'T SUCK UP,
MANAGE UP**
**HOW TO WORK WELL
WITH THE BOSS YOU HAVE,
NOT WISH YOU HAD**

Mary Abbajay

As much as we would love to believe that the workplace is (or should be) a meritocracy, where just being great at our job is all we need to succeed, reality tells a different story.

The real (and inconvenient) truth is that the workplace is a social system—meaning we have to work with, among, through (and sometimes around) other people. And in a social system, relationships matter—a lot. Our ability to cultivate and manage effective workplace relationships is essential for career success. Positive, respectful, and collaborative relationships create positive workplace experiences and results. Poor relationships produce poor experiences and results. And at the end of the day, just being good at our job is not enough. We must deliver great work while simultaneously being good at relationships—up, down, and across the organization.

Developing effective relationships with our colleagues is important for career success, but developing a positive and productive relationship with our boss is absolutely *critical* to our success. Whether we like it or not, bosses have a great deal of influence over our career success

and trajectory. Our relationship with our manager, and their experience with and of us, will influence what kinds of opportunities come our way. When we earn our boss's trust, good things await us; if we incur our boss's ire, we may find ourselves out of the running for promotions and opportunities. Long story short, while all workplace relationships are important—our relationship with our boss can hurt us or help us the most.

Yet in today's climate, this simple but powerful truth is elusive to many people. All too often we get stuck in the “my boss should” or “my boss needs to” mindset. We judge and resist how our boss operates—instead of trying to understand and adapt. This is a self-made trap. Relationships take two people. Developing an effective relationship with our boss is as much our responsibility as theirs. A bad or difficult boss is not an excuse for lack of effort on our part. It is our career that will suffer if we don't put ourselves in the driver's seat. Taking an active approach to cultivate and manage this relationship is what it means to “manage up.” Managing Up is about consciously developing effective relationships with our bosses in order to achieve the best possible results for us, our boss, and our organization.

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Bosses Suck, But So Do We

There are plenty of bad or ineffective bosses in the workplace. Despite all the research on leadership, employee engagement and culture, organizations still promote people based on their technical acumen instead of their leadership, management, or relational acumen. Then once in a management position, the organization continues to reward these managers based on business results and not on employee engagement or happiness. This is an unfortunate reality that won't be changing anytime soon. But it doesn't mean we are powerless.

In their groundbreaking book, *Thanks for the Feedback*, Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen argue that spending billions of dollars and millions of hours teaching people how to give effective feedback is a waste of money unless people learn how to effectively receive the feedback. The same may be true for the leadership-followership connection. While teaching people how to lead is extremely important, isn't it also important to teach people how to follow? The assumption that great leaders always create great followers is simply wrong. By only teaching leadership, we address only half the equation. It takes two to tango.

Embrace the "F" Word

In order to manage up, we must embrace the "F" word: followership. In America, we are obsessed with leadership. It's part of our cultural and sociological narrative and identity. We talk incessantly about leadership. We teach it, we preach it, we spend over 14 billion dollars a year on it. But we rarely spend much time discussing or validating the other (and equally important) side of the coin: followership.

Many of us resist being a follower because we don't really understand it. We think being a follower is being a patsy. We confuse followership with powerlessness. We conflate it with passivity and submissiveness. We think followership robs us of agency.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

If we reframe followership from a power construct into a relational construct, then we open up a wide world of choice and agency. In a relationship, everybody has agency. Managing our relationships requires us to become active players. The ability to connect and relate with those who think differently is what enables us to grow. When we actively and choice-fully manage our workplace relationships, we take control of our workplace experience. We become effective and empowered followers. It's about pro-action, not reaction. Agency over inertia. Choice over victimhood. Adaptability over rigidity.

Managing Up is About Choice

Managing up is not about blind followership. It's about making strategic choices to obtain the best results for us, our boss, and the organization. It's the win-win-win strategy. But in order to do this, we have to come from a place of choice, not from a place of victimhood. When confronted with any difficult situation we always have three choices:

1. Leave the situation. (Only we can decide when this is the best strategy, and sometimes it is.)
2. Accept the situation. (Stop complaining and get on with our day.)
3. Change the situation. (Change how we deal with situation by learning to manage up!)

When we resist what is, when we refuse to make an active choice, when we choose to only complain about our reality, we become a victim. Being a victim is completely disempowering.

Managing Up is About Adapting

In a perfect world, our bosses would adapt to us. They would identify and appreciate our unique qualities and personalities. They would align their preferences, workstyles, priorities, and personalities to ours. We could just roll into work every day being exactly who we are and find acceptance and success. But we don't live in a perfect world. Bosses are human beings just like us and as human beings, they bring their own way of thinking, acting, and believing. They have different perspectives, styles, experiences, and ways of relating. When our preferences and personalities align, it can be magical. When they don't, it can be frustrating.

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As much as we hate to admit it, we can't change other people. We can only change how we react and interact with them. Our bosses aren't going to change who they are or how they operate just because we would prefer them to be different. Her personality got her where she is today, his approach has been approved by the powers above him. She believes her communication style works. He gets rewarded for his style of managing. The organization doesn't see their behavior as a problem or doesn't have the stomach to address it. This presents us with a choice. We can sit back and complain or develop active strategies to adapt. In short, our agency comes from changing how we react and interact—and that's where Managing Up comes in.

The choice is clear: we can either sit back and let our frustration derail our career, or we can take an active role by adapting to the boss we actually have—not the boss we wish we had. After all, if we expect our leaders to adapt to us, shouldn't we be willing to adapt to them?

Adopt the Platinum Rule

The golden rule says we should treat others as we would like to be treated. This works great when we all want to be treated the same—meaning we all want and value the same type of interaction. But in the real world, especially in the workplace, people have different wants and needs and different ways of expressing those wants and needs. We all have different personalities, preferences, and pet peeves. Some people prefer to think fast, talk fast, and act fast, while others prefer to take a more moderate, measured, and careful approach to work and communication. Some people are social and friendly at work and they like to build relationships and get to know their colleagues, while others exhibit less friendliness and may value relationships primarily as a vehicle to accomplish tasks. Some people are very assertive and direct about their opinions, wants, and needs while others are less assertive and more accommodating and solicitous of other's ideas, opinions, needs, and wants. Some folks are

impatient for results, others very patient. Some need tons of data to make decisions, while others may need little or no data. Some are very emotive and expressive, while others are more emotionally reserved and contained. And the list goes on.

Managing up means embracing the Platinum Rule: treat others as they want to be treated. This means developing flexibility in our interactions with others—especially our bosses. By understanding what makes them tick, we can adopt strategies to create a more robust relationship. When we are willing and able to adapt our behavior, we gain power and choice. When we manage up, we take responsibility for our choices, actions, and attitudes. It's about taking charge of our own experience and being strategic in our interactions. It's about not pointing the finger at others. It's about exploring our options to see what we can do more of, less of, or differently. It's about owning our contribution to the relationship and taking responsibility for making it work.

Managing Up Starts Here

In order to successfully manage up, we must make a rigorous and honest analysis of the landscape of self and others. The key here is to understand the similarities and differences between us and our boss so that we can explore our options. It's a simple three-step process:

1. Develop Boss Awareness

To manage up, we must reflect on who we are managing up to. We must take the time to piece together the puzzle that is our boss. We have to become boss detectives. Pay attention to clues she leaves. Notice who works well with our boss and how they interact with him.

Look for patterns. We must ask ourselves the following questions:

- What is my boss's workstyle personality?
- How does she interact with others?
- How does he like his information? How does she prefer to communicate?
- What are his priorities? What are her goals?
- What are his concerns, challenges, and pressures?
- What is her experience? How did she get to where she is?
- What is his boss like? What does the organization expect from her?
- What does she expect from me? What are her expectations for team?
- How much does she delegate? When, to who, and how does she delegate?
- What are his pet peeves? What truly matters to her?

When asking these questions, try to be objective and nonjudgmental. This is about gathering clues and assessing reality, not about judging. The minute we start judging, we get trapped by our own ego. Once trapped by ego, our need to be right overrules our ability to think creatively and strategically. This kills our agency.

If you don't know the answers, then ask! Set up a meeting with your boss and find out. If your boss is unapproachable, ask others. It's not that hard to learn. It just takes a little effort.

2. Look in the Mirror

The second step is a bit harder as it requires taking a good long, honest look in the mirror. Managing up requires being brutally honest with ourselves about who we are, what we want, what we need, and what we are resisting. It's about understanding our contribution to the relationship. The following questions are good place to start:

- What is my workstyle personality?
- What are my workplace strengths? What are my workplace weaknesses?
- How do I like to interact with others? How do I prefer to communicate?
- What are my priorities and goals?
- What do I really need to operate at my best? What are my non-negotiables?
- In what ways are am I compatible with my boss? In what ways am I not?
- Is my boss really difficult or just difficult for me? Am I the only one struggling?
- Am I doing the job I was hired to do? Is my job a good fit for me?
- Do I bring the right attitude, energy, and motivation to be successful? Would I want myself as an employee?

- Do my co-workers think I am as great as I do?
- How am I contributing to the situation (for better or worse)? What am I resisting?
- Am I willing to make changes to my behavior and/or attitude?

There are no right or wrong answers to the above questions. Only honest answers.

3. Choose Actions to Close the Gap

Once we have a good sense of the landscape, now we get to choose. We get to choose in what ways we are willing or not willing to adapt. We get to choose what we are willing to do more of, less of, or differently in order to achieve success for ourselves, our boss, and our organization.

Remember, managing up is like putting together a puzzle. Part of the puzzle is our boss, part of it is us, and the rest of the pieces are the strategies we are willing or not willing to try. Some pieces will fit, and some won't. Only we can figure out how to piece together the puzzle of our workplace experience.

Managing up requires being brutally honest with ourselves about who we are, what we want, what we need, and what we are resisting.

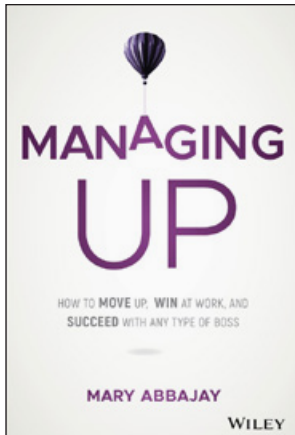
Stop Waiting for the Unicorn

Difficult bosses and challenging co-workers are—and always will be—an unfortunate fact of the working life. Stewing about these people only damages our morale; and simply wishing for a better workplace is well, wishful thinking. Better workplaces happen when we make them happen. Better relationships happen when we make them happen. Sitting back and complaining does us no good.

If we want a better workplace experience, then we need to learn to be more effective in our relationships. It's time for us to learn how to be empowered followers, to take an active role in managing our careers, ourselves, our bosses, and our experience. 🐾



Info



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About the author

Mary Abbajay is the president and co-founder of Careerstone Group, LLC, a woman-owned, full service organizational and leadership development consultancy that delivers leading-edge talent and organizational development solutions to the public and private sectors. She currently serves on the regional Market President's Board of BB&T Bank. She was Chairman of the Board for Leadership Greater Washington where she led the adult Signature Program, the Youth Leadership Program, and the Rising Leaders Program.



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