



In Pursuit of a Better Boss

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Would you like a better boss? A boss who helps you obtain valuable information, win needed resources, and secure important support for your group and for you personally — in short, a boss who's a real ally and partner?

If your boss provides these benefits, you're lucky. We hear far more complaints than praise from people about their bosses. If you're unlucky, this blog is for you, and its message is simple — your relationship with your boss is less a matter of luck than you think.

When we talk to managers with complaints, we find they usually assume the relationship rests entirely in the hands of the boss. It is what the boss makes it, and there's little they can do to change it.

Do you assume that it's your boss who sets the tone in your relationship? If so, test that assumption. Almost certainly, you have more ability than you think to shape how you work together. After all, it's a relationship of mutual dependence. You each need the other to succeed. Unless your boss is a psychopath (http://articles.boston.com/2010-06-20/bostonglobe/29296010_1_female-candidate-midas-touch-parliamentary-elections) or truly irrational, this interdependence is a foundation on which you can take steps to build something mutually beneficial.

Start by taking some responsibility for the relationship and asking yourself some basic questions:

Are you meeting expectations?

If your group isn't performing, you obviously cannot expect a great relationship. By underperforming, you're making your boss look bad. Hit your targets, work out a plan for hitting them, or re-negotiate the targets. If you don't, nothing else is likely to go right between you. Remember, too, that her expectations extend beyond simple numbers and include things like sharing key information, inclusion in certain key decisions, and even personal support and loyalty.

Do you see your boss as your coach (<http://hbr.org/product/coaching-people-pocket-mentor-series/an/13273-PDF-ENG?Ntt=coaching>) or your judge?

In fact, every boss is both and you need to figure out when and where he tends to be one or the other. Don't fall into the trap of thinking he's only a judge. That hyper-critical assumption will prepare you for the worst because it puts you always on your guard. But it rarely reflects reality — most bosses can and will play both roles — and it will keep you from reaching out to him and obtaining the benefits of a good relationship. Better to see his dual roles as extremes between which he moves back and forth, depending on the situation. At first, in small, low-risk ways, test when and how he's willing to provide support, and move forward based on what you learn.

Does your boss trust you?

Have you demonstrated to her satisfaction your competence and character, the two pillars of trust (<http://hbr.org/product/can-people-trust-you-influence-begins-with-trust-w/an/7315BC-PDF-ENG?Ntt=hill%2520lineback%2520trust>)? Does she believe you know what to do and how to do it? Does she believe in your values, standards, and intentions? Have you communicated them in your behavior and words? Any influence you have on her will begin with her trust in you.

Do the two of you see the current situation in the same way?

Do you see the problems you both face in the same way and do you agree about where you're going and how you're going to get there? Do you even understand the problems your boss faces? If you don't, he will inevitably wonder if you're helping him deal with them.

Are you able to see your boss as a person, not just an authority figure?

Behind your boss's title, there's an imperfect person just like you. She has hopes, aspirations, frustrations, strengths, weaknesses, and fears, and she's the product of her unique background, training, and experience. Do you know enough about her that you can begin to see the world through her eyes (http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2009/05/empathy_not_such_a_soft_skill.html) ? If you do, can you use that knowledge to adapt how you deal with her, just as you use such insights to shape how you deal with anyone else?

Can you identify your boss's strengths and weaknesses?

Perhaps you can only see the weaknesses, but identify his strengths too — again, just as you would with anyone else. Have you thought about how to build on his strengths and work around or compensate for his weaknesses? You'll never have a boss without weakness of some kind. Be generous in your judgment of him, just as you hope your people will judge you generously.

Are you unknowingly bringing your own emotional baggage into this relationship?

Through years of growing up and dealing with authority figures, starting with our parents, many of us learn to dislike and distrust anyone who claims authority over us. Are your attitudes about your boss shaped by your own feelings and attitudes that are based not on experience with her personally but with others from your past?

Take responsibility for this crucial relationship. Test and probe to find what's possible. There are bad bosses with whom you will have little ability to shape the way you work together, but most bosses are just people like you, with likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses. It will never be a relationship of equals — that's not how the world works — but it can be mutually supportive, and even mutually rewarding.