

PM WORLD TODAY – PM TIPS & TECHNIQUES – SEPTEMBER 2008

Thirteen Tips to Effective Upward Management

By Lonnie Pacelli

So let's get right into this....

Have you ever known a manager who held great respect of his or her team but was not respected by his or her management? Or maybe you've had a manager that just couldn't get things done effectively because he or she just didn't know how to "work the system"? Or even still, are you are a manager who is continually frustrated because you can't get your manager to do what you need him or her to do? If any of these sound familiar to you, welcome to the world of ineffective upward management.

Upward management is one of those skills that some do very well, many never seem to master, and virtually all learn only through on-the-job lessons-learned. When done well, both the manager and employee work as a team to ensure each other is informed, address problems before they spin out of control, and be more effective at managing. When done poorly, both manager and employee are not only ineffective at getting the job done but are chronically frustrated due to mis-steps and surprises.

Through the years I've come to categorize most poor upward managers into four personality types:

- **The Brown-Noser** - This is the employee who treats his boss as some kind of rock star and constantly searches for what his boss wants to hear. Rather than upwardly managing, the brown-noser upwardly affirms whatever it is the boss is thinking.
- **The Rebellious Teenager** - This is the employee who consciously conceals information from her boss because she wants to demonstrate that she can get things done without help from her boss. Rather than upwardly managing, the rebellious teenager keeps her manager in the dark by withholding information.
- **The Cowardly Lion** - This is the employee who simply is afraid to share information with his boss because he fears his boss' reactions. Rather than upwardly managing, the cowardly lion avoids sharing information unless completely painted into a corner.

- **The Erupting Volcano** - This is the employee who subscribes to the "more is better" school of information management and will tell her manager every gory detail of every single event every single day. Rather than upwardly managing, the erupting volcano spews data like hot lava and forces her manager to pick out the important facts.

So how do you avoid miss-steps in managing upward? Give this baker's dozen a look and see if one or two of these nuggets can help you be a better upward manager:

- **#1 - Understand your boss** - Think about how your boss likes to communicate; does she prefer written emails or verbal discussion? Does she like structured one-on-one meetings or informal chats? Get a clear understanding of how your boss likes to engage and adapt your style to her style.
- **#2 - Stick to objective facts** - When presenting information avoid emotionally-biased assessments. Sure, you may have put your heart and soul into a project but if the project no longer makes business sense to do then it's your responsibility to put personal feelings aside and do the right business thing.
- **#3 - Don't dump problems on his or her doorstep that you should be solving yourself** - Yes, your manager has greater responsibility than you, probably gets paid more than you, and most likely has more organizational influence than you. That doesn't mean you get to delegate things you should be solving yourself. Handle the problems that you're paid to handle and enlist your boss for the stuff that requires his influence in the organization.
- **#4 - Be specific about what you need** - Whether it be money, resources, or some other form of assistance, be very specific about what you need, why you need it, and what will happen if you don't get what you need. Credible objectivity is crucial here: if it looks as if you are "stacking the deck" by exaggerating consequences or embellishing benefits you're likely to not get what you need. Also, subsequent asks are going to be viewed with greater skepticism.
- **#5 - Don't ever give reason for your boss to question your credibility** - Simply put, if you get caught stretching the truth on even the smallest of facts, you've now given your boss reason to question not only the little things but

also the big things. You've got to stay pure with your boss and protect your integrity by never allowing your credibility to be put to question.

- **#6 - Don't manage upward at the expense of managing downward** - I've known one too many managers who did a great job of keeping his boss happy but had a team that wanted to string him up by his thumbs. Look, at some point in time those that manage up at the expense of managing down will get found out and will have to pay the piper. Don't play Russian roulette with your career by keeping your boss comfy while ticking off your team.
- **#7 - Respect your boss' time** - Got a meeting with your boss? Show up on time, come prepared to discuss whatever topics need discussing, and end the meeting on time. Your boss is busy and her time should be utilized as effectively as possible. Don't let your boss see your meetings with her as a waste of time.
- **#8 - Diligently follow through on commitments** - So your boss asks you to complete an assignment by tomorrow. You agree to meet the commitment. The deadline passes and you haven't met the commitment and all you can offer up is some lame excuse. Sheesh. Even if you think an assignment given to you is the dumbest assignment on earth, if you've made a commitment to do it then meet the commitment. Not following through shows a lack of respect for your boss and breeds distrust.
- **#9 - Present options** - In decision making managers like to see alternatives and the consequences associated with each alternative. Some of the best decision making meetings I've been in with my bosses have been where we had meaningful dialogue around two or three viable options to resolving a tough problem. My job in the process was to frame up the options, provide facts to support each option, and provide a recommendation. Sometimes the recommendation was taken, sometimes not; the most important thing was that a good decision was made because there was good informed discussion.
- **#10 - Make your boss look good** - Let's say that your boss is due to make a presentation to his boss and is relying upon you to provide some critical information. You give your boss the information he needs and he presents it to his boss. He then gets fricasseed because the information is wrong. Guess whose office he stops at first on his way back from getting barbecued? Simply put, don't put your boss in a situation where he looks bad in front of his management; you've not only hurt your credibility, you've hurt his credibility.

- **#11 - Don't suck up** - Telling your boss what she wants to hear can label you as a spineless know-nothing who doesn't have the intestinal fortitude to manage effectively on your own. You'll not only quickly lose the respect of your team, your boss will ultimately see through you and not respect your leadership abilities. Sure, you may get the occasional self-absorbed manager that craves shameless idolatry; but by and large bosses view sucking up as incompetence.
- **#12 - No surprises** - Ever tell your boss that your project is on schedule and on budget then at the last minute spring a huge schedule or budget slip on her? Particularly early in my career I've had this happen more than once. For it to happen more than once is shameful to say the least. Bosses don't like surprises where they are forced to accept a problem without having the option to try to fix it before it got out of control. When you see problems make sure you inform your boss; just make sure you're working diligently to resolve the problem and not just to cover your @\$\$.
- **#13 - Admit mistakes...quickly** - Look, screw-ups happen. Heaven knows that I've got more screw-ups to my name than many managers will ever see. The important thing is to own up to your mistakes quickly and outline what you are going to do to rectify the mistake. Being the last one to recognize you've made a mistake just diminishes your credibility, so own up to those gaffes and get to work fixing them.

Upward management: sometimes a real pain, many times a diversion, but always a necessity. Take stock of your upward management skills and see where you might need to tie up some loose ends using some of these nuggets.

About the Author:



Lonnie Pacelli

Author



Lonnie Pacelli is an internationally recognized project management and leadership author and consultant with over 20 years experience at Microsoft, Accenture and his own company, Leading on the Edge International. Read more about [Lonnie](#), subscribe to his [newsletter](#), see his [books](#) and [articles](#), and get lots of free self-study [seminars](#), [webcasts](#) and [resources](#).