



Adobe headquarters, San Jose, CA. Gensler. ©Emily Hagopian Photography, emilyhagopian.com.

## Manage Up To Move Up

By 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 all workplaces—even A/E/C workplaces—are social systems, meaning we have to work with, among, through (and sometimes around) other people. And in a social system, relationships matter—a lot.

Positive workplace relationships create positive workplace experiences and results. Poor relationships produce poor

results and experiences. At the end of the day, just being good at our job isn't enough. We must deliver great work while simultaneously being good at relationships—up, down, and across the organization. This is especially poignant for those in the A/E/C marketing profession. They are often tasked with projects where they have no official authority and must depend on their ability to influence through positive relationships to accomplish their goals.

While developing effective relationships with our colleagues and clients is important for career success, developing

a positive and productive relationship with our boss is absolutely critical. Whether we like it or not, bosses have great influence over our career success and trajectory. Our relationship with our manager, and their experience with us, will influence what kinds of opportunities come our way. When we earn our boss's trust, good things await us. If we incur their 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.

*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.*

### **Managing Up Is Not Sucking Up**

Let's be clear: Managing up is not about sucking up, butt-kissing, or becoming a sycophant. Managing up is also not about working for an abusive or toxic boss—the only way to manage toxic bosses is to leave them. Managing up is about consciously and deliberately developing and maintaining effective relationships with supervisors, bosses, and other people above us (and across from us) in the chain of command. It's a deliberate effort to increase cooperation and collaboration between individuals who have different perspectives and uneven power levels. It's about consciously working with your boss to obtain the best possible results for you, your boss, and the organization. Managing up is about you taking charge of your workplace experience.

### **Managing Up Is About Adapting**

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. 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. This presents us with a choice. We can sit back and complain or develop active strategies to adapt. In short, our empowerment comes from changing how we react and interact, and that's where managing up comes in.

### **Forget the Golden Rule—Try 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 needs, goals, personalities, preferences, and pet peeves.

Some people think fast, talk fast, and act fast, while others prefer to take a more moderate, measured, and careful approach to work and communication. Some folks are social and friendly at work and like to 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. And the list goes on.

Embracing the Platinum Rule means striving to treat others as they want to be treated. If we can understand their workplace personality, preferences, and pet peeves, then we can be more strategic in how we interact with them. For example, if your boss likes project updates to be brief and bottom-lined, then resist the temptation to delve into details—unless she asks for them! Remember, we cannot change other people—we can only change how we act, interact, and react with them. We can own our contribution

to the relationship and take responsibility for making it work.

### **Solving the Puzzle**

Managing up is like putting together a puzzle. Part of the puzzle is our boss, part of it is us, and the rest includes the strategies we're 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. It's a simple three-step process.

#### **1. Look outside.** Become a boss

detective. Take some time to reflect on who your boss is and how she operates. Pay attention to clues he leaves. Notice who works well with your boss and how they interact with her. Look for patterns. Do not judge, just gather information. Ask yourself:

- What is your boss's workstyle personality? How does she interact with others? How does your boss like getting information? How does he prefer to communicate?
- What are his priorities and goals?
- What are her concerns, challenges, and pressures?
- What is his boss like? What does the organization expect from her?
- What does she expect from you? What are her expectations for her team?
- What are his pet peeves?

**2. Look inside.** The second step requires taking a good long, honest look in the mirror. Managing up requires being brutally honest with yourself in terms of who you are, what you want, and what you need. It's also about understanding your contribution to the relationship. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What is my workstyle personality? How do I like to interact with others?
- How do I prefer to communicate?
- What are my priorities and goals?
- What are my workplace strengths and weaknesses?

The Quadracci Pavilion - Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI. Santiago Calatrava.  
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- Do I bring the right attitude, energy, and motivation to be successful with my boss?
- Would I want myself as an employee?

**3. Assess the gap and adapt.** Once you have a good sense of the puzzle pieces, you get to choose how to put them together. You get to choose in what ways you are willing or not willing to adapt to your boss. Here are some questions to explore:

- In what ways are we similar? In what ways are we different?
- In what ways am I compatible with my boss? In what ways am I not?
- Am I willing to make changes to my behavior and/or attitude?
- What could I do more of? Less of? Or differently to work well with my boss?

### You Get To Choose

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, we must take action to make that happen. We get to choose what strategies we want to employ. We get to choose whether or not we are willing—or able—to manage up. We also get to choose when it's time to find a new opportunity. ■



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Learn more during the session, “Manage Up To Move Up: Take Control of Your Career,” on Thursday, August 1, at 3:15 p.m. in Washington, D.C., during the SMPS annual conference.

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