

The Unwritten Rules of Managing Up

Project Management Techniques from the Trenches

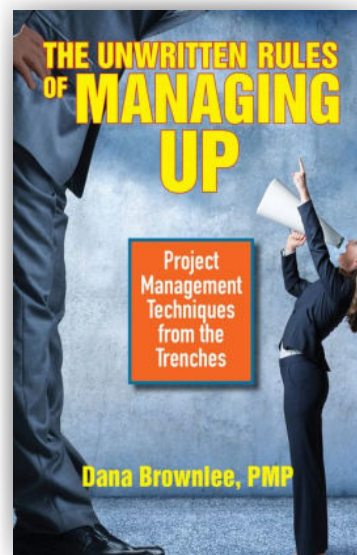
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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- *Anticipate problems.* Predict problems so that you can possibly stop them before they occur.
- *Be reliable and productive.* Become your boss's go-to person by being dependable and industrious.
- *Adjust your work and communication style.* Smooth your working relationship with your boss by adjusting your style to fit his or her preferences.
- *Be flexible.* Take on projects that no one else wants.
- *Tell the truth.* Tell your boss hard truths when no one else will.
- *Learn to deal with difficult personalities.* Tactfully navigate tough personalities that can bar your way to success.

OVERVIEW

Managers are often the key factor in determining people's job satisfaction. Even the most well-meaning bosses may exhibit behaviors that make them difficult to work with—whether because of quirks in their personalities or because they're more distant from day-to-day processes and swamped with managerial responsibilities. In **The Unwritten Rules of Managing Up**, Dana Brownlee reveals steps you can take to work more effectively with your manager and keep your projects running smoothly.

DEFINING THE "DIFFICULT BOSS" AND "MANAGING UP"

Most managers occasionally find themselves exhibiting poor behaviors, to varying degrees. Generally, difficult bosses are those whose behaviors impede their own and their subordinates' success. Often, the

issues stem from poor communication between managers and their direct reports. Though it isn't easy to define exactly what makes a boss difficult, Brownlee identifies six types, all of whom can be managed.

Managing up is based on the idea that making the manager's job easier will lead to greater success for the entire team. As a subordinate, you should identify your boss's working style, then take steps to customize your individual style to match it. By adapting to how your boss prefers to get things done, you can cultivate a smoother working environment and have a better chance of completing your work.

MANAGING THE TORNADO

The *Tornado* is the type of manager who tends to intimidate subordinates, take over projects and meetings, and ignore others' opinions. Managing up when your boss is a Tornado should include:

- Meeting with the boss early and often. If you can discover your boss's opinions and hot-button issues before team meetings, you may be able to adjust your strategy to prevent the boss from completely taking over.
- Suggesting your team use the *round robin* technique, where you start with your manager's idea and then go around the table to hear others' opinions, or the *compliment, document, pivot* (CDP) technique, where you compliment your boss's idea, write it down, and then ask the rest of the team for other ideas.
- Asking the team for written, anonymous feedback on how the group can operate more effectively.

MANAGING THE WISHFUL THINKER

The *Wishful Thinker* is always pushing subordinates for more by adding new, unrealistic tasks and expectations without considering the full repercussions. To manage a Wishful Thinker:

- Have a conversation with the manager to determine the real reason he or she made the request. Once you've uncovered the underlying motivation, you may be able to propose a more feasible alternative that achieves the same goal.
- Quantify how the manager's request will affect the project's scope, cost, and time. It's possible the manager hasn't considered the full impact.
- Frame the manager's requests as changes to the project and introduce a formal change management process to help the manager understand the consequences of his or her requests.

MANAGING THE CLUELESS CHAMELEON

When managed by a *Clueless Chameleon*, subordinates often receive conflicting or unclear directions about their projects and responsibilities. Often, this is because the manager isn't sure of exactly what he or she wants. To manage a Clueless Chameleon:

- Clarify assignments early by asking questions, providing samples of deliverables, and creating project charters.
- Work with your boss to determine what he or she would consider a successful outcome for the project so that everyone has the same long-term goal in mind.
- Identify what specific issues are most important to your boss so you can keep them in mind throughout the project. In addition, identify any important opinions or biases the boss has that may impact the project's progress.

MANAGING THE MIA BOSS

The *MIA Boss* is frequently absent from the office for personal or business-related reasons. The absences cause significant delays in the team's work because you're unable to obtain necessary approvals and input. Here are some ways to manage up with an MIA Boss:

- Develop a relationship with your boss's administrative assistant and leverage his or her access to your boss if possible. The assistant could also be a great source of advice for ways to manage your boss's hectic schedule.
- Suggest that the team use a group calendar so you can plan for your boss's absences as far in advance as possible.
- Offer to take some tasks off your boss's plate whenever you can to ease the boss's stress and open up time in his or her schedule.

MANAGING THE MEDDLESOME MICROMANAGER

If your boss is a *Meddlesome Micromanager*, you likely feel as if the boss doesn't trust you because he or she is constantly asking for updates or getting overly involved in the day-to-day details of projects. Managing up with a Meddlesome Micromanager often requires:

- Trying to understand the underlying anxiety that makes the boss feel compelled to take such an active involvement in your work. This will better position you to address the boss's real concerns.
- Working with your boss to clarify in writing who'll be responsible for each task throughout each project.
- Pointing out other important tasks you'll be unable to complete because of the unnecessary updates the boss is requiring.

MANAGING THE NAKED EMPEROR

A *Naked Emperor* has serious flaws that are obvious to everyone but that manager. This boss's faulty ideas and excessive ego sabotage the team's success, but everyone is too afraid to speak up. The Naked Emperor is a difficult type of boss to manage up, but you can:

- Suggest that the team institute a policy of anonymous, 360-degree feedback so that everyone, including the manager, gets regular feedback from supervisors, peers, and subordinates.
- Play devil's advocate by illustrating a plausible worst-case scenario that could result from the boss's ill-informed ideas.
- Enlist the support of your team members when suggesting contradictory ideas, and be sure to voice your support when others choose to speak up.

MANAGING UP WITH ANY BOSS . . . EVEN A GREAT ONE!

Whether your boss is one of the types Brownlee presents or an excellent manager, the following best practices will benefit any working relationship and help your team work together smoothly and effectively:

- Build cordial relationships with your manager before you need something from him or her.
- Be congenial and low maintenance.

- Focus on being stellar at your current job over networking for other positions.
- Tailor your communication to fit your boss's preferences by taking into account his or her time, style, pet peeves, and priorities.
- Think strategically by analyzing risks, being up-front about both good and bad news, and proposing important changes to day-to-day processes when necessary.
- Offer to take on some of your boss's tasks so he or she can concentrate on managerial duties.

HOW MANAGERS CAN HELP THEIR STAFF MANAGE UP

If you're a manager who wants to encourage your subordinates to improve the working environment and manage up, consider the following techniques:

- Share your preferences for work and communication styles openly so that subordinates don't have to spend weeks or months trying to puzzle it out.
- Work to develop a culture that values questions—and even challenges—from subordinates.
- Collaborate with your subordinates to develop a set of ground rules for working together that encourage openness and teamwork.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dana Brownlee, PMP, is an energetic and innovative corporate trainer, speaker, and workshop facilitator who helps individuals and teams reach new levels of performance. She's the founder of Professionalism Matters, a corporate training company based in Atlanta, and previously worked at AT&T, IBM Consulting, and EMC Corporation. Brownlee has been featured by *Working Mother*, CNN, *HuffPost*, *Entrepreneur*, and *Fast Company* and presents to audiences across the United States and globally.

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