

How to 'manage your manager'

It's Monday morning and you can see the days ahead stretching before you... The thought of the weekly marathon looms, but you console yourself with the idea of a drink with your mates at the weekend. Your manager is already driving you mad. They've got you working on a massive and tedious project that no-one else wants to do, and now they've asked you for some vital information 'without delay' that you simply don't have. You're not convinced that you can make it through the day without saying something you shouldn't. You feel unappreciated, out of control and stressed...

Does any of that sound familiar? If it does, don't worry, you're not alone: according to recent surveys, 43 percent of workers interviewed say they do not feel valued by their employers. It's rarely the nature of the work, the long hours, or even the low pay that frustrates people - more often than not, it's the person's manager that sends them running to the job pages.

If you've ever had a bad manager yourself, you'll almost certainly have your own passionate views on the subject... and it won't surprise you that ranked amongst the top 10 sources of stress and frustration at work, employees reported:

- feeling undervalued
- having no control over the working day
- their manager changing their minds
- lack of support from their manager
- pressure/unrealistic demands from their manager
- being put-upon by their manager
- bullying behaviour by their manager
- interruptions by their manager...

Of course, we'd all like to have the perfect manager, who is appreciative, supportive, honest and fair. But nobody is perfect, and very few managers deliberately try to irritate their staff! The good news, is that it's normally within your power to improve the situation. Learning what makes your manager tick – what they expect, what they need and what irritates *them*, can help you communicate better, and improve your chances of maintaining a positive two-way working relationship.

The idea of 'managing your manager' is a fairly recent concept. Traditionally, we are expected to pander to our manager's every whim, waiting to be told what to do and how to do it. However, more recently managers and employees have begun to realise that this approach is not particularly rewarding or productive. Although the term "managing your manager" might imply the necessity to manipulate or control your manager, that isn't the case. Rather than being an underhand exercise, it is a way for employees to help their managers do their jobs better, and to have more control of their own work life. It is about seeing your manager as your customer. If there are disagreements or a lack of clarity, then it is about being proactive in trying to work things out in order to achieve a productive working partnership.

Begin on the right foot

Have a meeting with your new manager to discuss key issues and groundrules. These might include: your overall job responsibilities, your expectations of each other, your jointly agreed objectives, your company and manager's core values, preferred work processes and prescribed "best practice".



Have regular meetings

There are many managers who don't know what their team members' roles actually require on a day-to-day basis. Although this is not usually because they don't care (it's usually about other priorities taking over), this can be very damaging to morale and leave you feeling unsupported. You should aim to set up regular meetings with your manager, and be prepared to take the initiative to request them yourself. Aim for weekly meetings to keep abreast of progress on projects and changing priorities. This should be in addition to your annual reviews and quarterly updates where you and your manager revisit bigger issues, such as your career goals and what you need to achieve them.

Work with them

No matter what your manager is like, recognise that it is your choice to either work with them or to work against them. However, it's a lot easier and less stressful to work with them! You probably already go out of your way to accommodate your clients or customers. So why not think of your manager as another client? They have expectations, and those should define what you deliver. Keep in mind that your relationship with your manager is probably the most important one you have at work - it affects your job satisfaction as well as any opportunities for promotion.

Take responsibility for your own development

Most of us want a manager who will support and develop us. However, unfortunately not everyone is so lucky. If your manager isn't forthcoming in getting to know you, then you will need to help them. Make sure your manager knows your accomplishments, is aware of the extra work you put in, and knows a bit about your personal life. It will help them to appreciate your efforts. If that doesn't work, then you can try networking with others in your management chain. It's unreasonable to expect your manager to be entirely responsible for accelerating your career: ultimately, it's your own responsibility. Remember that an expectation is also resentment waiting to happen, and it is very difficult to hide resentment.

Support your manager

Every manager wants their people to be on-side. Find out about their scope of responsibility, the number of direct reports, industry background and history within the company. Also find out about their own career goals, their relationship with their manager and any outside pressures. Placing yourself in your manager's shoes can provide insight into the demands they may be under, and will help you to gain perspective. Their bad days usually end up becoming your bad days, so it's best to try to avoid them. If they seem to have little time for you, consider whether they may be under pressure from their own manager. If so, offering your assistance can come as welcome news and be a source of genuine appreciation. You might overhear your manager saying that they can't get to that meeting, so why not offer to go in their place? In short, support any weaknesses you can, and as far as is possible, help them to look as good as they can be.

Don't undermine your manager

Although you will probably question your manager's judgments from time to time, it's important to recognise that their accountability usually extends up the corporate ladder, requiring them to consider the views of others. It's also critical that you choose your battles very carefully. Remember Sergeant Wilson's pet question in 'Dad's Army: "'Do you think that's wise, sir?'" Avoid saying this or anything like it at all costs! You might think it, but be strategic and come up with a well thought-out suggestion and respectfully present your case. Then simply let them take it from there. You'll get nowhere forcing the issue - a protracted argument is the last thing your manager wants.

Work out the real problem

If your manager is driving you crazy, take time-out to consider what exactly is going on. Are they controlling and overly involved? Are they indecisive, hesitant, and vague? Or are they unreasonable, overloading you with work? Only once you know the real problem, can you begin to work out the solutions. Maybe they need to develop more confidence in you. If so, you should do all you can to prove your capabilities, such as asking for complete control over small tasks and gradually asking for more responsibility as you prove yourself. Maybe you need to guide your indecisive and/or vague manager offering specific choices and asking for clarification. If your manager is being unreasonable with their requests, you may need to discuss priorities, and seek alternative ways of dealing with anything you can't handle.

Learn from your experience

If things are feeling unbearable, then you need to stop for a moment and consider whether your current attitude could be feeding into that feeling. You may need to be more flexible, as this can help others to be more flexible with you. It might be hard to swallow your pride, but if you don't try to make it work, it never will. Ask yourself and your manager what you could be doing differently to improve your relationship. Remember that the situation is almost certainly not going to last forever, so you can see it as a learning experience. With every manager you have, make a point of learning something from them, even if it's what not to do. The chances are that you will become a manager yourself one day, so all of your experiences are valuable.

Be proactive

You will impress your manager by pre-empting what they want/need. Make a point of spotting pieces of information they always pay attention to, or particular times they typically request a recurring report or assignment. Then you can begin to anticipate and meet their needs without being asked. You should also aim to update your manager regularly on progress with your ongoing projects – preferably in writing (email will do). If you can, try to include some good news. Put any really good news in its own message so they can forward it onwards and upwards. Also be proactive in asking for any resources you need to do your job to the best of your ability. Don't just wait for your manager to guess what you need. Let your manager know why you need whatever it is, and in particular how it will help you to do your job more effectively. Equally, if things are not going to plan, it's better to face the music early so that you can solve the problem together. Don't let things get bad then panic, feeling that you have to sort it out on your own.

Communicate effectively

Poor communication is the source of most problems in the workplace, whether it is minimal or non-existent information exchange, or just poor listening skills. If you can improve the communication flow between you and your manager, you will be on the way to a much happier time at work. If your manager isn't forthcoming, try asking them for the information you need. Remember that face-to-face time also creates engagement and



rapport, so schedule a proper appointment with them, telling them what you would like to achieve. Plan what you are going to talk about beforehand and don't leave until you have established what you want to say. It may help to have notes to refer to. If your productivity improves as a result of this communication, your manager will hopefully learn a useful lesson. If your manager is often away from the office, you'll need to be creative in your communication methods. Get to know their timetable: try to find out when they will be in the office or if necessary, when is best to schedule in phone time.

If all else fails...

Sometimes, there is just no way to make the relationship with your manager work. Maybe you have conflicting personalities or work styles. Maybe you're in a dead-end position. Modifying your own style and behaviour to please them can be a big adaptation to make. If you've really lost all hope of improving your relationship with your manager, sticking with your job could damage your own self-confidence. So if you think you've reached the point of no return, and can honestly say that you are not learning or gaining anything from the situation - and it's not just your issue - then you may need to start considering your options. Of course, if you're dealing with a larger issue, such as sexual harassment, discrimination, bullying, or privacy invasion, you should seek appropriate advice from your colleagues in Human Resources.

Would you or others in your team benefit from training in 'managing your manager'?

We hope that you'll find these tips useful. However, most people derive huge additional benefit from the interaction, practical exercises and valuable feedback that face-to-face training gives. H2 offers:

- A 1-day open course in "Managing your Manager" from £195 + VAT per person
- In-house training in "Managing your Manager" from just £50 + VAT per person per day

Here's what some satisfied customers said after attending our training in 'managing your manager':

- *"This was a fantastic course! I had never really thought about my responsibility in making my relationship with my manager work. Thanks!"*
- *"A really useful day... I have come away feeling so much more positive and motivated to make things better between me and my manager!"*
- *"I have always deferred to my manager for making the relationship work. I know now that it's also my responsibility to negotiate for what I need to help me to do my job better."*
- *"I am looking forward to having a useful conversation with my manager to discuss how we can do things differently to help each other to achieve our own objectives. I can see now how important it is to get this relationship on track..."*

Contact H2 Training & Consultancy: Freephone: 0800 0015 151 or Email: h2@h2training.com