Postdoc Academic Chat #9

Managing Up

How to manage your postdoc supervisor and eventually your department chair, dean and anyone else "above" you, and tips on how to be an effective manager yourself!

Wednesday, June 3, 2020

Readings

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#1 Managing up: An Industry Skill You Can Learn in Academia

By David G. Jensen A writer and speaker on career issues worldwide, David Jensen is the founder of CareerTrax Inc.
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There are many differences between a career in academia and one in industry. Although there are some common elements in the way that the science proceeds, there are many more areas of great differentiation. And yet, there are a few areas of career advice that apply just as well in academia as in industry. I have one of those for you this month.

Recently I was on a long flight, from one coast of the United States to the other, which gave me time to get acquainted with a new book: Think Like
an Entrepreneur, Act Like a CEO. The author, career coach Beverly E. Jones, brought forward an important concept related to the boss-subordinate relationship: “managing up,” referring to building a relationship with your boss that allows for mutual benefit.

This idea turns out to be one of those rare areas of concordance between industry and academia because the boss-subordinate relationship is so important in both contexts. After discussing this topic with postdocs and principal investigators at a recent Career Day I attended, I came to believe that, if you composed a list of the toughest bosses in the world, at least half of them would be in academia. That makes the university just the place to start sharpening your managing up skills.

Kissing up or good career strategy?
In the book, Jones describes managing up as a series of behaviors that are much like any other form of leadership, but instead of leading subordinates, you are doing your best to eliminate obstacles placed in front of you by those who are higher up. By helping them move their agendas forward, benefits accrue that have the downstream effect of making your own goals more accessible.

But wait a minute—is this starting to sound a bit too much like that obnoxious character you knew as the brown-noser from your first lab, the one who would do anything to ensure that he was in the boss’s good graces? No, that’s not what Jones would suggest, nor would I. Often it’s a matter of subtlety, and it all boils down to intention. If your intent is to have praise showered on you, then you’ll be crossing that brown-nosing line and quickly earn the wrong kind of reputation. But when managed correctly, your actions to help those higher up will very directly influence your own progress in a positive way.

Here are five of Jones’s suggestions for managing up, adapted to a scientific career.

1. Set unselfish goals. Managing up does not mean trying to manipulate people or creating situations that put a win in your corner. Focus on the greater good—what’s good for the lab as a whole—not what’s best for you. Managing up could include offering proposals that will increase the lab’s visibility or bring benefits to the entire team. Achieving this mindset requires, as Jones writes, a sense of “authentic
humility.” And remember that, by helping your boss and the team, you will ultimately be helping yourself as well, for example, by improving the culture of your working environment.

2. Understand what your boss, department, and institution need. Look closely at your institution’s plans and biggest investments, and think about how your boss and your department fit into those plans. Look for every opportunity to develop ideas that will contribute to those larger departmental and institutional strategies and share them with your boss. Again, the goal is to help the team so that you can reap the trickle-down benefits.

3. Maintain and enhance your area of expertise. While working toward plans that benefit the general good of the lab or department, you’ll find opportunities to develop an area where you are the authority by gaining expertise in an area that complements your boss’s strengths. For example, she may not feel comfortable with how to council others on finding an industry job. If you learn about it, you can bring back valuable insight that can help your boss expand her knowledge. It can also help your labmates who may be looking for industry jobs, and yourself. One friend of mine became the in-house expert on networking and career guidance while he was a postdoc. He became recognized across the department and his institution as the go-to person for anything related to career development training. A year or two later, he was offered a job at a major Japanese university doing exactly that!

4. Be gracious in managing credit and blame. As Jones writes, “credit is a vast resource to be spread around, not hoarded.” Share the credit wisely and you’ll avoid a reputation as a kiss-up. Similarly, take more than your share of the blame when it goes around. Be the one who accepts blame and quickly turns toward solutions and you will earn respect and trust.

5. Report without drama. There’s already lots of drama in the average laboratory—avoid doing anything to add to it. Be the one who can bring the boss solutions without inserting any unnecessary intensity. Avoid exaggeration, gossip, and negativity. Instead, gain the reputation of being direct yet tactful. Don’t be the one who tells the boss what she wants to hear, but aim to be the one who brings
accurate portrayals of problems along with positive recommendations for moving forward.

Choosing the right approach
Managing up is a highly customized process which requires that you know something about your boss. You can’t start managing up from the first day in the lab as a new postdoc; you’ll have to watch, listen, and learn before knowing anything at all about that person’s style.

One area that illustrates this principle is communication, which is a crucial component of managing up effectively. Ordinarily, communication is an exchange that requires both parties to participate toward a successful outcome. If you and I sat down to talk over a cup of coffee, it would be my responsibility as much as yours to ensure that our exchange works out well. Unfortunately, it doesn’t always work this way when you are dealing with bosses. Simply because of their status on the prestige totem pole, they don’t have to follow the same rules.

In communicating with everyone else, you lay out your message and—hopefully—listen well to theirs. But with the boss, you’ll need to pay close attention to her preferred communication style and adapt as needed. Does she prefer direct communication, where you come right to the point and spit it all out in 1 minute or less, or does she prefer an ice-breaking exchange before getting down to business? Everyone is different, and your input will be better received if you fine-tune your communication to match your boss’s preferred mode.

Regardless of the boss’s style, Jones suggests that you be brief. “Be succinct,” she writes. “Assume your boss is busy and won’t want to waste time. If you ask for three minutes to discuss something important but then talk for 10 before reaching your point, the boss could be feeling impatient or annoyed by the time you make your case.” To avoid this uncomfortable situation, she continues, “[p]lan ahead. Before your conversation, be clear in your mind about your points, and be prepared to state them simply and directly.”

From my own past experience, I know that it can be a real temptation to overload a conversation with too many topics. In most cases, you don’t get a meeting with the boss all that often, so you want to make it count and squeeze in every detail you’ve been thinking about. But the key is to
prioritize. Do the best you can to limit the number of items in the conversation. If you try to discuss more than three or four points, you run the risk of wearing out your welcome. Nothing strikes more fear in my heart than a boss who is looking at his watch when I am trying to make an important point!

Lastly, there’s one thing almost universally true about managing up. Bosses don’t like it when you come in and rattle off problems without having a suggested course of action to go along with them. “Bring me solutions, not just problems,” is the way my first boss described it. That’s right—you may be in front of the boss to get her to resolve an important question, but you’ll still need to suggest your own course of action. She may not take your suggestion—don’t be offended if that’s the case—but with time you’ll gain respect for being proactive and creative in addressing issues that arise. And that first time the boss agrees with you, it will feel mighty good.

Some bosses will lap up the compliments and eager coffee runs of those who intend to follow a kissing-up strategy. That’s not you. Regardless the size of your boss’s ego, she or he will have a genuine need for a person on their team who thinks about wins on a grander scale than the selfish view of a brown-noser!

#2 David L. Bradford: How Do You Manage Up in the Workplace?

The co-author of *Influencing Up* describes how to build a more productive relationship with the boss.

October 8, 2013 | by Michael Freedman
GSB Organizational Behavior Career & Success Management

In the classic leadership book *Influence Without Authority*, Allan R. Cohen and David L. Bradford describe how even workers with no official power can effect change in an organization. They recently teamed up again to write *Influencing Up*, which explains how employees can manage upwards in the organizational chart — and why they need to, now more than ever. We recently sat down with Bradford to discuss the book. Excerpts:
What is the premise of *Influencing Up*?

It's about how you can influence powerful people, and be powerful in doing that. You need to be influential because you need things: resources, permission, or support. But this is not just for your sake, but for the boss's sake as well. Powerful people need powerful direct reports. They need direct reports who can take initiative in coming up with new ideas and getting them implemented. Furthermore, even the most successful leaders get blinded by what they want, and need reports who will "tell truth to authority" in a respectful manner. Most powerful leaders do not need or want passive, obsequious subordinates.

What does it take for a direct report to gain power in the employee-boss relationship?

First, not falling into the trap of accentuating the power gap. Research, much of it done here at Stanford, shows that when there is a significant gap between the most powerful and the least powerful, dysfunctional things happen for both parties. In the book, we say that "high power makes you deaf and low power gives you laryngitis." When you have high power, you tend to overestimate your abilities and can be closed to influence, which can be very dangerous in a fast-changing world. On the other hand, if you perceive you have very little power, you tend to shut down instead of offering alternate points of view, which is really what is needed. Now, sometimes power is objective: some people have a lot of money and others have very little; someone is CEO and another is a clerk. But we often exaggerate the power gaps, and when we do that we hurt ourselves and our bosses.

The second essential thing is for a direct report to have high influence skills. In our previous book, *Influence Without Authority*, we describe the various ways that a direct report can have power and a key one is using the Law of Reciprocity: I have influence insofar as I give you what you need, which builds up a line of credit for me to get what I need. Many things that a direct report wants is also in the boss's best interest, but is not framed that way. And when thus framed, and linked with what the organization needs, a person can have a great deal of influence.

The third thing is to move beyond the concept of being a subordinate and, instead, being a junior partner. "Subordinate" carries all sorts of negative implications including excessive deference, passivity, and the like. But
"junior partner," while still recognizing the hierarchical difference, says "we are in the same boat together," so are concerned for the boss's success as well as one's own. Junior partners don't let senior partners make mistakes.

**What is the senior partner's role in the dynamic?**

We wrote the book from the point of view of the junior partner to make them more powerful in a way that's helpful to the senior partners. That said, it would be nice if the senior partner didn't fall into the high-power gap and assume that he or she has private conversations with God and has all the answers. Also, that the boss doesn't get threatened when people disagree. It would be wonderful to have a perfect boss, but we rarely do. And our point is that you don't need to have an ideal manager for you to be a powerful junior partner.

**So, much of this responsibility really falls on the junior partner?**

We're making that argument. It may seem counterintuitive, but we do it for several reasons. One is, bosses are concerned about their relationship with their boss. Furthermore, your boss has other direct reports and may not have as much time for you as you would wish. Also, we want to build a world in which people are more in control of their own destiny, so you're not taking a subordinate orientation that says, "If only my boss would do these things for me."

This is not about making a perfect boss; it's about you making a better relationship. It is keeping the boss's needs in mind and even taking responsibility to try to balance what the boss is not good at. Let's say your boss puts off decisions. You could say, "Hey, Boss, my sense is you like to get as much information as possible before making a decision, but we get criticized when decisions are delayed. Is it okay if I am more active in pushing for decisions?" This is a more useful way than grousing about the problem. It's you being a proactive junior partner.

**Isn't what you are talking about going to lead to more disagreements? Is that a problem?**

Yes, it will cause more disagreements — that's the good news! But that doesn't necessarily have to be a problem. Constructive disagreements not
only can cut down on mistakes, but [also they] can be a source of creativity and, therefore, increase the quality of the outcome.

Now, there are two sorts of disagreements. One is about the fundamental goals, the ends. If you disagree on these, then it raises the question about whether you ought to be in this organization. But, most disagreement is around means. If I'm explicit that we agree on goals, but not on how we're going to achieve them, then I can both be on the boss's side — be a partner — and be direct. I can say, "Hey, Boss, we agree we need to build better relationships with marketing. If we send out this memo, it's going to bend them out of shape. Can we do something about that?"

Even so, it doesn't mean that direct reports always get their way or have license to disagree in perpetuity. Bosses set different standards. I know one CEO who said, "You're allowed four Nos, and each one has to bring in new information. I will listen to your disagreements, but after the fourth time, if I still disagree, this is the way it's going to be." Bosses have the right to say that. At some point you sign up, and that's where the hierarchy plays a role.

What risks are there for the junior partner trying to create this partnership?

This obviously has risk. But we would argue it's more risky to do nothing. To succeed in today's world, you need to be seen as a person who can take initiative, who gets things done, who can be relied on to be on the boss's side, and to tell the truth when that's crucial. To not do that, we would argue, is riskier. To be passive, to wait to be told to do things, to not tell the truth, we think is the biggest risk of all.

Influencing

Some bosses are impossible. What do you do then?

There are some bosses who would see any disagreement as insubordination, but in most cases when people say they have an impossible boss, on examination, we find that they may be difficult, but really aren't impossible. There is the tendency to give up too early and over-read gruffness or resistance as a sign that we are about to make a career-limiting move. For example, we raise a question about an action our manager is considering and the response of, "I think you are wrong; what's your evidence," causes us to
back down. Powerful people act powerfully but, as we said, they usually want powerful direct reports. The mistake is seeing bosses as impossible when they really aren't.

How do you know the difference between a resistant boss and an impossible one?

There's rarely a boss who will fire you on one disagreement so, even if you get into a difficult conversation, it doesn't necessarily mean that you have jeopardized your career. You may want to ask yourself, "Was there something about the way it was raised? Did I not have the facts? Did I fail to acknowledge agreement with the goals, but disagree on the means? Did I not speak to the boss's best interests? Was it the setting — disagreeing in public — that produced this?" Mostly, we find bosses are resistant when the subordinate makes a request that adds to the boss's workload, or implicitly or explicitly criticizes the boss as a bad boss.

But let's assume that the conversation didn't end that well. Again, before jumping to the conclusion that you have an impossible boss, would it be worth the effort to discuss what is getting in the way of a more open relationship? Could you go into the boss's office three hours after a difficult conversation and say, "Joe, I want to be able to tell you the truth, but the signals I'm getting are that either I did it in the wrong way or that I shouldn't disagree. But if I can't raise concerns, that gets me to withhold useful information, and my intention is to be helpful. So, can we have a conversation about how we're talking?"

The boss may say, "You did it in public." Or, "You came to me with opinions and didn't have facts and if you want to disagree, this is how to do it." Or, the boss may say, "What I say is right, and you're never to disagree." And then you know that boss is impossible. But you have pushed back, you have shown you're there to be as helpful as you can, and we find that most bosses value that. If it turns out that you can't be a junior partner, the best recommendation is to protect yourself. Don't do things that make you vulnerable, and try to look for another job if you can.

The objective in building an empowered relationship is not as an end in and of itself, but as means for you to be more productive, to be able to take initiative, to get the resources you need, and to truly add value to the organization. And achieving that is a crucial source of your power.
What about when you need to influence the boss's boss — do these same principles apply?

It may not be possible to build as tight a relationship as with your immediate boss, but the principles still apply. You need to give that person what they need, so that you can get what you need. Now, it may be more difficult knowing what a person further up wants, but often we can make a good guess by knowing the pressures they're under, the demands of their job, what they talk about. Again, you need to be aware, even when dealing with the boss's boss or further up the organization, of not falling into the power gap trap and shutting yourself down when you really do have more power than you think we have.

Some people work with a boss for 10 years or 20 years, and they never do this. Can you just start?

I think you can start at any time. Couldn't I go in to my boss and say, "Mary, we've worked together for 10 years. I think I've done a reasonably good job. But I realize that there are times when I haven't been as direct as I could be, and I don't think it serves you well. I would like to stop doing that." Mary is likely to be surprised, but my guess is ultimately Mary's going to say, "Yeah, I've noticed that; and I'd like you to stop doing that, too."

It also works well from the outset. In the book we have the case of a person, George, who starts a new job and says to the boss, "If I do anything that bothers you, I want you to tell me immediately." He's taking responsibility to define the relationship. And it works. George says, "I never have to worry about what my boss is thinking because we've set the ground rules. And it's made my boss more comfortable."

How can the senior partner encourage this kind of initiative from the junior partner?

The first thing is that the boss has to share what he or she wants. It could be, "I read this interview about how direct reports could be more of a partner," and then to say, "I'd like you to think about how you could be more proactive; and let's talk about it." This way the boss initiates wanting to change the relationship, but puts the responsibility back on the direct report by saying, "How would it work for you?"
The other thing the boss can do is reward the person who takes initiative. Let's say there's a person pushing back in a meeting, and the decision goes against her. It would be helpful if the boss would say in the meeting, "You know, Ann, you didn't win this one, but I really appreciate that you stuck in there and kept us honest. That was really helpful." So you're rewarding the person for the effort.

When we cover this material in executive programs, inevitably participants — mostly upper-middle managers — say, "I really can't be that direct with my boss." Then I ask, "Would you want your direct reports to be that direct with you if they thought you were making a mistake?" And, in almost every instance, they say yes. I then add, "Isn't it interesting? Everyone thinks they have insecure bosses, but they're secure themselves." We are often afraid to give what we say we want. Partially, it's because we don't know how to do it. This book is about how you can be direct while still being on the other person's side, and be productive and powerful in the process.

David L. Bradford is the Eugene D. O'Kelly II Senior Lecturer in Leadership, Emeritus.

#3. “Mentoring Up”: Learning to Manage Your Mentoring Relationships

Tomorrow’s Professor eNewsletter

Message Number: 1525

“Mentoring up” is a concept that empowers mentees to be active participants in their mentoring relationships by shifting the emphasis from the mentors’ responsibilities in the mentor-mentee relationship to equal emphasis on the mentees’ contributions.

Folks:

The posting below looks at seven core principles that provide a foundation to understanding the various aspects of an effective mentoring relationship that can mutually benefit the mentee and mentor. It is from Chapter 7 – “Mentoring Up”: Learning to Manage Your Mentoring Relationships, by Steven Paul Lee, Richard McGee, Christine Pfund, and Janet Branchaw, in the book, The Mentoring Continuum – From Graduate School through
“Mentoring Up”: Learning to Manage Your Mentoring Relationships

“Mentoring Up”

“Mentoring up” is a concept that empowers mentees to be active participants in their mentoring relationships by shifting the emphasis from the mentors’ responsibilities in the mentor-mentee relationship to equal emphasis on the mentees’ contributions. “Mentoring up” is adapted from the concept of “managing up,” introduced by Gabarro and Kotter’s classic paper in the *Harvard Business Review* (1980). Gabarro and Kotter conducted field research on how business managers worked productively and discovered that effective managers not only managed their employees, but also managed their peers laterally and their supervisors upwardly. Their investigations led to the groundbreaking publication “Managing Your Boss,” which provided case studies and strategic advice to managers on how to consciously work with their bosses for the benefit of their working relationship and the company. Despite criticism that they were promoting false flattery or political manipulation, Gabarro and Kotter’s original ideas have persisted. The *Harvard Business Review* reprinted their paper twice (in 1993 and 2005) and their concept of managing up appears in multiple books and countless blogs directed at young managers.

Though Gabarro and Kotter’s original audience consisted of managers in the corporate world, many of the principles and strategies they proposed
can be applied in academic mentoring relationships. Their advice is based upon the understanding that the relationship with one’s mentor involves mutual dependence between fallible persons. Thus, they stress the importance of assessing the mentor’s and mentee’s strengths, weaknesses, and preferences in working and communication. Most importantly, they stress the powerful role that mentees play when they proactively engage in the relationships: “Some superiors spell out their expectations very explicitly. But most do not. Ultimately, the burden falls on the subordinate to discover what the boss’s expectations are” (Gabarro and Kotter 1980, 99). This means mentees must actively seek to understand their mentor’s priorities and pressures, not passively assume that the mentor will be aware of and able to meet a mentee’s needs. This does not mean the responsibility for an effective relationship lies solely with the mentee; rather, it points to the power mentees have to shape the relationship to meet their needs.

Adapting Gabarro and Kotter’s concept, we define mentoring up as the mentee’s proactive engagement in the mentor-mentee relationship, so that both parties mutually benefit from the relationship and move forward towards an agreed-upon purpose or vision. Mentoring up is a process in which the mentee continually learns about the relationship and develops skills to engage in it as the relationship evolves. Ultimately, learning the skills needed to proactively manage an evolving mentoring relationship will contribute significantly to the mentee’s ability to effectively navigate and manage a career.

Core Principles in Mentoring Relationships

Gabarro and Kotter provided a valuable approach to working effectively with one’s boss; we believe a similar approach can be applied to mentoring relationships in higher education. Here we integrate their approach with core principles that have emerged from two evidence-based mentor and mentee training programs, Entering Mentoring (Handelsman et al. 2005) and Entering Research (Branchaw, Pfund, and Rediske 2010), which have been shown to improve mentored research experiences and mentoring relationships. We place them into the “mentoring up” framework and show that the core principles upon which they are based align well with Gabarro and Kotter’s original ideas and provide a framework for “mentoring up.”

Entering Mentoring uses a process-based approach to research mentor training in which mentors working with mentees discuss and attempt to solve mentoring challenges across a range of core themes. Through these
discussions, participants gain knowledge and skills needed to improve their mentoring practice. The *Entering Mentoring* curriculum was developed based on the experience of research mentors in the biological sciences; it draws on core principles in mentoring from a range of disciplines, including business. A combination of qualitative and quantitative data indicate that compared to untrained mentors, the mentors who participated in the *Entering Mentoring* training assess their mentees’ skills and communicate with them more effectively. Moreover, undergraduate researchers indicated that they had a better experience with the trained, as compared to untrained, mentors (Pfund et al. 2006). One version of the *Entering Mentoring*-based curricula, targeting the faculty mentors of clinical and translational researchers, was tested in a randomized controlled trial conducted at 16 institutions with 283 mentor-mentee pairs. Mentors assigned to the training showed significantly higher skills gains compared with the control. This held true across career stage, institution, and gender. Mentors assigned to the training self-reported improvements in their mentoring behaviors, which were corroborated by their mentees (Pfund et al. 2014; Pfund et al. 2013).

*Entering Research* is a parallel curriculum for research mentees that brings undergraduate researchers together to discuss the challenges they face as novice researchers in learning to do research and in navigating their mentoring relationships. Like *Entering Mentoring*, it is a process-based curriculum in which the specific content of each session emerges from the mentees’ experiences. The framework used to guide discussions in *Entering Research* was developed from the experience of undergraduate research program directors and the literature on undergraduate research experiences. Qualitative and quantitative data collected from undergraduate student mentees (N = 64) who participated in the *Entering Research* training showed significantly higher self-reported gains in research skills, knowledge, and confidence when compared to a control group of students (N = 144) who also participated in undergraduate research experiences but not the *Entering Research* training. Of particular relevance were the *Entering Research* students’ gains in “understanding the career paths of science faculty” and “what graduate school is like,” which were significantly greater than those of the control students. In addition, 41% of *Entering Research* students reported that the training helped them learn how to effectively communicate and interact with their research mentors (Balster et al. 2010).
The principles described in *Entering Mentoring* and *Entering Research* form the foundation for effective mentoring relationships, and address various aspects of the relationship. Here we use these principles as a framework for applying the concept of “mentoring up” to mentors and mentees working in academic research settings. Below we present core principles that underlie these two evidence-based curricula. Each principle is accompanied by a short description adapted from the *Entering Mentoring* and *Entering Research* materials.

1. **Maintaining Effective Communication.** Good communication is a key element of any relationship and a mentoring relationship is no exception. It is critical that mentors and mentees seek to understand their own and the other’s communication styles, and take time to practice communication skills.

2. **Aligning Expectations.** Another key element of effective mentor-mentee relationships is a shared understanding of what each person expects from the relationship. Problems and disappointment often arise from misunderstandings about expectations. Importantly, expectations change over time, so reflection, clear communication, and realignment of expectations are needed on a regular basis.

3. **Assessing Understanding.** Determining what you understand as well as if someone truly understands you is not easy, yet is critical to a productive mentor-mentee relationship. Developing strategies to self-assess and assess others’ understanding is an important part of being an effective mentor and mentee.

4. **Addressing Equity and Inclusion.** Diversity along a range of dimensions offers both challenges and opportunities to any relationship. Learning to identify, reflect upon, learn from, and engage with diverse perspectives is critical to forming and maintaining an effective mentoring relationship.

5. **Fostering Independence.** An important goal in any mentoring relationship is helping the mentee become independent; yet defining what an independent mentee knows and can do is not often articulated by either the mentor or the mentee. Identifying milestones towards independence and setting goals are key strategies to fostering independence in a mentoring relationship.
6. **Promoting Professional Development.** The ultimate goal of most mentoring situations is to enable the mentee to identify and achieve some academic and professional outcomes after the training period. It is the responsibility of both the mentor and mentee to identify and articulate these goals and to strive towards them together.

7. **Ethics.** Mentors and mentees must engage in and model ethical behavior, while openly discussing issues dealing with gray areas. Moreover, it can be important to acknowledge when a mentoring relationship includes an unequal power dynamic and any additional ethical considerations it raises.

The seven core principles above provide a foundation to understanding the various aspects of an effective mentoring relationship that can mutually benefit the mentee and mentor. This chapter focuses specifically on the skills mentees need to develop to be effective, proactive, and successful partners in their mentoring relationships. However, we recognize that both the mentor and the mentee must gain mentoring knowledge and skills and intentionally engage in effective mentoring practices.

**Works Cited**


