

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.

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.

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.

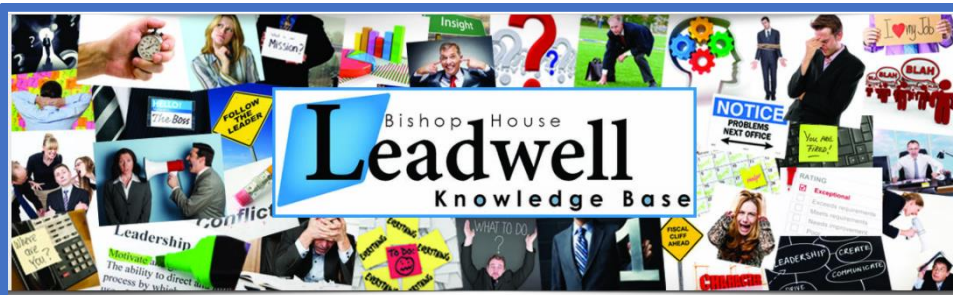
When we cover this material in executive programs, inevitably participants — mostly upper-middle managers — say, "I really can't be that direct with my boss." Then I ask, "Would you want your direct reports to be that direct with you if they thought you were making a mistake?" And, in almost every instance, 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.

by Michael Freedman

This article was originally posted at: <https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/david-l-bradford-how-do-you-manage-workplace%20>

Visit [Bishop House's Leadwell Knowledge Base](#) for more resources on the topics that matter most to leaders



New Leader

Whether you just got promoted and don't know where to begin, or you have been in a leadership role for a while, these resources will provide you with valuable insight into the fundamentals of leadership.



Managing Change

Managing change can be challenging. Look here for ideas on how you can manage yourself through change and strategies for leading your team through change.



Effective Communication

Effective communication skills are essential to effective leadership. Click here to explore how to better communicate with employees, peers and others.



Managing Up

How to manage up when your boss has you down. Look here for strategies for dealing with your boss.



Your Development

Look here for ideas on how to develop as a leader and to continue to grow in your leadership knowledge.



Managing Performance

Explore content about being a coach to your employees, guiding them to success, managing poor performers, motivating good performers and more.



Productivity

Insights and tips on how to be more productive as a manager. Learn how to effectively and efficiently manage time, emails, meetings and other aspects of your role as a leader.



Building My Team

Resources for learning how to build a cohesive team as well as strategies for where to start when it is anything but.