CHAPTER 25

The Art of Managing Upwards

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ABSTRACT

Being technically skilled and having a high rank are not the only keys to success in organisations; the skill of managing upwards is one of the most undersold skills. Managing up involves working with, influencing and supporting one's manager to promote organisational and personal goals. There is no manipulation or flattery. It's actually rather a conscious and proper working routine that enhances interaction, coordinates energy and boosts performance throughout a company. The article looks at the practice in detail and explores the underlying concepts, the aims and objectives it supports, the skills needed, the challenges it offers and the ethical issues it reveals. The article examines how managing upwards helps an individual's career progression, a manager's effectiveness and an organisation's overall performance, based on leadership theory, organisations behaviour and the experienced practice in the workplace. It explores the manager's working environment, the need for good up communication, the manager's responsibility for taking ownership and initiative, establishing trust and credibility, the importance of emotional intelligence and the effective management of disagreement. It also reflects the variation of the practice in the hierarchical, flat and culturally different organisational contexts. The article ends by concluding that "management upwards" is a shared responsibility and an important skill in today's work environment.

Keywords: Managing upwards; Manager–subordinate relationship; Communication; Trust; Organisational hierarchy.

1.0 Introduction

Traditional accounts of management locate authority at the top of an organisation: managers give direction and employees carry out tasks. This hierarchical model persists in many settings, but it no longer captures the reality of most contemporary workplaces.

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Organisations today are flatter, more collaborative and considerably more complex, and flatter structures require employees at every level to exercise influence in the absence of formal authority. The practice of managing upwards has become correspondingly more important, since it is the means by which employees shape decisions taken above them.

Managing upwards requires that employees understand their manager's objectives, working style, constraints and expectations, and that they adapt their own conduct and communication accordingly (Gabarro & Kotter, 2005). It involves building a working relationship with a superior, anticipating what that person will need, supplying information in usable form and helping to shape the decisions that follow. The practice is commonly mistaken for flattery, political manoeuvring or an attempt to undermine a superior. It is none of these. Managing upwards builds partnership, establishes accountability and distributes responsibility for organisational results.

The practice matters most in knowledge-based and service organisations, where decision-making is dispersed and managers depend on their teams for information and judgement. Where it is done badly, teams and managers alike become confused, choices are poorly informed, time is wasted and frustration accumulates. Where it is done well, it builds trust, improves the quality of decisions and enables managers to perform their own roles more effectively.

2.0 Concept Explanation: Understanding Managing Upwards

2.1 Definition and scope

Managing upwards consists in employees taking active responsibility for the relationship with their manager. It requires understanding a manager's objectives, preferred mode of communication, sources of pressure and manner of reaching decisions, and adjusting one's own conduct so that both parties are more likely to succeed (Gabarro & Kotter, 2005). The practice differs fundamentally from managing subordinates, since it cannot draw on authority. It depends instead on influence, and therefore on credibility, communication and emotional intelligence. Its scope includes:

- Communicating clearly and concisely with senior colleagues.
- Anticipating difficulties and proposing solutions to them.
- Providing candid and timely feedback.
- Aligning individual work with organisational objectives.

2.2 Why managing upwards matters

Managers operate under substantial constraints: pressure of time, an excess of information and accountability to their own superiors. They depend heavily on their teams for data, interpretation and execution. Where employees manage upwards poorly, managers reach decisions on the basis of incomplete or inaccurate information, and the consequences follow accordingly. From the employee's standpoint, the practice yields visibility, credibility and opportunities for development. Those who manage upwards well are regarded as reliable and strategically capable, and are considered ready for greater responsibility. Advancement tends to follow.

2.3 Managing upwards distinguished from office politics

The practice is frequently confused with office politics, but the two are distinct. Political behaviour of the objectionable kind involves ingratiation, manipulation and the pursuit of personal advantage at others' expense. Managing upwards, by contrast, consists in candour on both sides and in ensuring that a working relationship functions properly. Conducted without integrity, it destroys trust rather than building it, and with the trust goes the influence it was intended to secure.

3.0 Key Dimensions of Managing Upwards

3.1 Understanding the manager's context

Understanding a manager's role, pressures and constraints is fundamental to the practice. Managers are accountable for their own performance and for that of their teams, and they commonly face competing priorities, limited resources and demands from above. Employees who manage upwards effectively take the trouble to understand three things in particular:

- The manager's objectives and the measures by which their performance is assessed.
- The pressures the manager faces from more senior management.
- The manager's leadership and communication style.

Some managers prefer detailed written reports; others prefer brief verbal summaries. Adapting to such preferences improves efficiency and reduces friction, and the adjustment costs the employee very little.

3.2 Effective communication

Communication is central to managing upwards, and what matters is not only its content but its form and its timing Upward communication is clear, concise and useful, and is neither too lengthy nor will it omit critical information. It has the following main characteristics:

- Speaking in terms of how messages impact the organisation.
- Understanding the threats and opportunities that may arise before they are critical.

Choosing the right medium(s) for the message, written, verbal or formal. It's common for workers to wait to talk about a problem until it becomes significant and can no longer be hidden. Early communication, on the other hand, allows the manager to have options available.

3.3 Taking ownership and initiative

To manage 'upwards', employees need to come off the 'waiting' side and take a more active role. It involves taking responsibility for one's own position and making an effort to solve the problems that arise, rather than simply describing the problems themselves: identifying problems, discussing choices and offering solutions instead of just presenting problems. When this happens consistently and regularly, managers become more confident in employees' decisions and this, in turn, leads to more autonomy and responsibility. The cycle of autonomy, enhancing performance, and enhancing performance, supporting autonomy.

3.4 Building trust and credibility

The money of practice is trust. The opinions of trusted employees are much more closely monitored by managers and trust builds with consistency, competence and integrity over time. Where employees: Credibility is enhanced where employees:

- Meet deadlines and honour commitments. Admit errors openly and not hide them.
- Provide accurate and well-researched information.

Once credibility is established, an employee may question decisions and advance a differing view, provided this is done respectfully. Without it, the same challenge is likely to be dismissed.

3.5 Emotional intelligence and self-awareness

Emotional intelligence assists considerably in managing upwards (Goleman, 1998). It allows an employee to recognise their own emotional responses and those of others, and to conduct difficult conversations accordingly. Those who possess it read a manager's disposition accurately, adjust their approach to suit it and respond to pressure or disagreement without escalation. Timing and empathy are decisive. Raising a contentious issue at an unsuitable moment rarely succeeds, however sound the underlying argument.

3.6 Managing differences and conflict

Disagreement between employees and managers is a normal feature of working life, and handled well it produces better outcomes than unbroken agreement would. Managing upwards does not require avoiding conflict; it requires conducting it constructively. Respectful disagreement supported by evidence and framed in terms of organisational objectives improves the quality of decisions.

Employees who manage upwards effectively are able to:
- Separate the merits of an idea from the person advancing it.
- Argue from evidence rather than from feeling.
- Identify common ground and shared objectives.

Handled in this way, conflict strengthens a working relationship rather than damaging it.

4.0 Ethical Issues in Managing Upwards

For all its advantages, managing upwards raises ethical questions, since the boundary between legitimate influence and manipulation is not always obvious. Ethical practice rests on integrity, openness and adherence to organisational values.

Practices that fall outside those limits include:
- Withholding significant information in order to protect oneself.
- Excessive flattery or the cultivation of personal favour.
- Undermining colleagues in pursuit of individual advantage.

Such conduct may yield short-term benefit, but it generates difficulties over time and forfeits the trust on which all subsequent influence depends. Ethical practice is directed at organisational success rather than personal gain.

5.0 Managing Upwards in Different Organisational Contexts

5.1 Hierarchical organisations

In strongly hierarchical organisations the practice requires greater sensitivity to authority and to established protocol. Employees must find ways of taking initiative while observing the conventions that govern how seniority is addressed.

5.2 Flat and agile organisations

In flatter organisations managing upwards becomes a more collective undertaking. Employees have direct access to senior management and are encouraged to advance their own proposals, so that the practice consists largely in active participation and in alignment with shared purpose.

5.3 Cultural contexts

Cultural setting also shapes how the practice is understood. In societies characterised by high power distance, openly questioning a superior may be regarded as inappropriate, whereas in low power-distance settings it is actively encouraged (Hofstede, 2001). Employees working across cultures must therefore adapt not only what they say but the manner in which they say it.

6.0 Conclusion

Managing upwards is a capability that many overlook. As workplaces have grown more complex and more interconnected, the ability to influence those above one in an organisation without possessing authority over them, to communicate clearly and to build a working relationship with a superior has become decisive for individual and organisational success alike. The practice is not a matter of advancing one's own interests. It consists in collaboration, accountability and shared responsibility. It improves the quality of decisions, keeps work moving and builds a workplace founded on trust, while also supporting the development, visibility and leadership capacity of those who practise it.

Managing upwards ultimately changes how work and leadership are understood. It demonstrates that securing results is no longer the exclusive province of those holding senior positions but a capability distributed across an organisation. Where people exercise it well, they are able to navigate complexity, add value and contribute to the organisations they serve.

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