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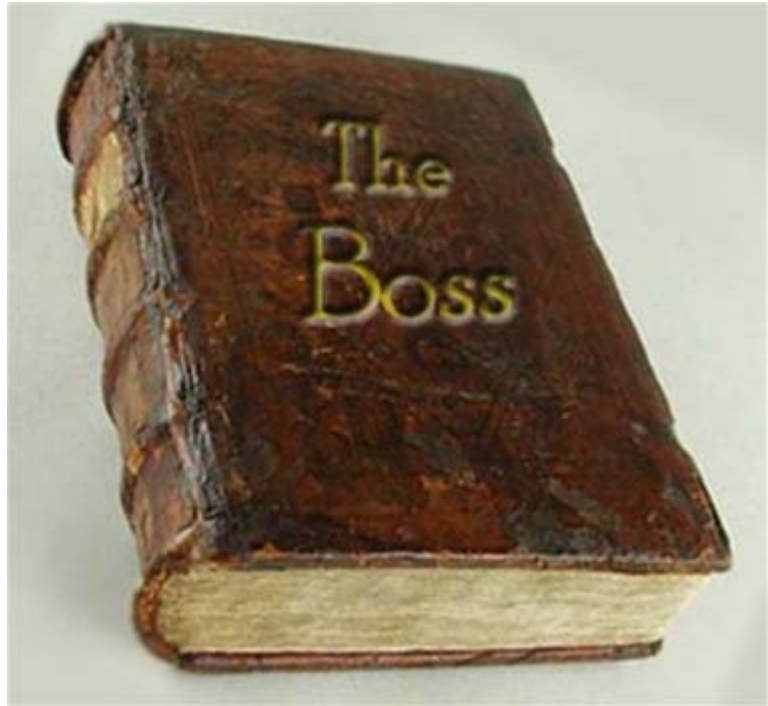
## Career Compass No. 12: Communicating with Your Boss

by Dr. Frank Benest

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Need help understanding what your boss wants or needs? In this installment of Career Compass, Dr. Benest offers advice on assembling an "operations manual" for the Big Cheese.

*Not only is my manager very busy, but she and I don't seem to have a connection. Therefore, I don't get a lot of time to meet with my boss and sell my ideas and when we do meet, we're not on the same page. I know that effectively communicating with my manager is critical to my success. So, what do I do?*



You are absolutely right. Effective communication with your boss is essential to your success. By developing a positive relationship and effectively communicating with your boss, your manager is more likely to:

- Support your ideas
- Provide resources to implement your proposals
- Promote you or recommend you for visible or "plum" assignments
- Advocate your ideas up, across and the down the organization
- Serve as your strong supporter and "sing your praises" with executive management.

In terms of developing better communications with your boss, you must first understand that it is more than communications. It is about "relationship." Positive relationship precedes effective communication.

Here are some strategies to enhance your relationship as well as communications:

## **PRACTICE “POSITIVE REGARD”**

First, you must practice “positive regard.” If you want to effectively communicate with your boss and influence her, Eric Fromm, the noted psychologist, suggests that you must first get into the mind and heart of your boss and acknowledge her values, aspirations, goals, fears, and motivations. You also need to identify her key interests, hobbies, and idiosyncracies. Positive regard will assist you in shaping or “framing” any proposal. For instance, if a manager is more oriented toward social justice than economic development, you can frame your affordable housing proposal to focus on social equity as opposed to housing the workforce.

How do you develop positive regard? You can get into the mind and heart of your manager by observing her in action (for example, at meetings), asking seasoned employees or close associates about her, or conversing with her and asking questions about any number of topics.

## **DEVELOP RAPPORT**

It is always helpful to develop rapport as a prelude to problem-solving or at least at the same time as you are solving problems with your boss. You can invite your manager out to coffee or sit with the manager in the lunch room and talk about non-work issues or discuss work projects of interest to the manager. Positive regard will suggest some topics or issues that may provide a basis for developing rapport. Simply knowing that a supervisor’s kids or pets or favorite sports teams are positive topics can help you better relate and converse with your supervisor. Plus, work becomes more fun if you can connect with team members, including your boss.

## **USE REFERENT POWER**

Positive regard will help you identify key reference groups to which your manager is oriented. Getting the faith community or the Chamber of Commerce on board in support of an idea or involved as a partner will create interest on the part of your manager depending on her reference groups.

## **UNDERSTAND THE COMMUNICATION STYLE OF YOUR MANAGER**

To enhance communications, you need to figure out how your boss prefers to communicate. Is your manager informal or formal? Does your boss like for staff to simply pop into her office with a new idea or make an appointment? Does your manager like to talk about an idea first, or does she prefer to get a memo or email first, read it, and then talk about the issue? Does your manager like a talking outline from staff with bullet points or a formal and comprehensive proposal? Does your boss like to converse for a while about non-work topics before getting into the work items or get to the work issues immediately?

Regardless of the communication style, you need to identify what your manager wants to know about an issue—for example, goals, costs, service to under-served groups or other service implications, partnerships, or political ramifications. Obviously, find out what she wants and give it to her.

## **FIGURE OUT THE DECISION-MAKING STYLE**

It is also critical to understand the decision-making style of your manager. Is your manager an “analytic,” requiring a lot of data before making a decision? Or is she an intuitive, “ready-fire-

aim” type of decision-maker, willing to run with a good idea? The decision-making style of your boss will determine how you shape your communications.

### **PRESENT A SOLUTION, NOT JUST A PROBLEM**

Most managers do not like staff to dump their problems on them without a proposed solution or better yet several potential solutions. After describing the problem, it is always a good idea to recommend one or several approaches to address the problem. It will demonstrate that you have thought through the issue and you are taking responsibility for helping address it.

### **ASK FOR WHAT YOU NEED FROM YOUR SUPERVISOR**

Here is a final word of advice. After presenting your proposal or concern, you need to specifically ask your manager for authority to do something. Do you need permission to form a team, write a board report, spend some money, approach a new partner, or go out to bid? Whatever you need, ask for it! Even if your boss wants more time to think about the proposal or issue, you need to identify what you need from your manager.

### **IN SUMMARY**

Your manager can be a supporter, promoter, and advocate, or a roadblock. If your values, ideas, and career advancement are important to you, then figure out your boss.



*Career Compass* is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff, and appears in ICMA's [JOB newsletter](#) and online. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's senior advisor for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future Career Compass, e-mail [careers@icma.org](mailto:careers@icma.org) or contact Frank directly at [frank@frankbenest.com](mailto:frank@frankbenest.com).