

Working with your CEO

How to succeed in this high-stakes game

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ISHN, May 2012, p. 74-75

Throughout my career, I've dealt with senior managers of all types. I've had to figure them out and "manage up" — manage their expectations and the politics of doing my job. I've discovered some key principles for success and I'm still using them:

Meet with your boss regularly.

Find a time convenient to his/her schedule and make it a regular time slot, barring an emergency. Keep it short, say 15-30 minutes. If you do this every week, this amount of time should be ample. Keep your thoughts focused and on point to specific issues and upcoming events and milestones.

Come to every meeting with a detailed agenda.

Try to break your agenda into three parts: accomplishments, on-going activities and issues you need assistance with. When you present issues, prioritize them by order of importance, and list everything on the agenda you need to discuss. This gives your boss the comfort that you won't waste his or her time. Also come in with a plan A, B, and C, depending on the issue. This allows your boss insight into your thinking. Bring any needed backup documentation to refer to if needed. Be sure to take notes on your agenda and file it for future reference. This is particularly important if you have contested decisions.

Keep a pulse on your boss's changing priorities.

Ask your boss:

- What's your priority today? You don't know unless you ask. Perhaps you can help. Even if you can't, he or she knows you stand willing to do so.
- What do you need today? This could be something simple or something very complicated. Be ready to shift your daily "to do" list to help your boss.
- What can I do for you? This demonstrates you are willing and able to step up to the plate and roll up your sleeves.
- What else needs to get done? Think ahead and make sure all loose ends are tied up to make your boss look good in front of his/her peers.
- What problem do you need me to take care of? Stand ready to help your boss out and relieve his/her workload.

When you ask these questions, be prepared to be loaded with additional tasks. Remember, the boss' agenda is more important than yours.

Be prepared to give a status report on your projects at any time.

Update your boss on what you are currently working on, where you are in terms of accomplishing certain tasks and how far you've progressed on any long-range projects.

Start your day early.

Use this time to prioritize and plan. It is best when the office is empty and quiet. Even ten minutes can make a difference. Being early, or punctual shows professionalism, respect, reliability, and eagerness. If you are frequently fashionably late, it demonstrates the exact opposite. If you have to get around town for meetings, build in time cushions

Be a gatekeeper.

Some people just want to chat. They seem to have no other job but to wander from office to office telling funny stories. Handle them one-on-one, perhaps relaying the message, "The boss isn't here; can I take a message?" Your role is the "office diplomat." This means NOT saying what you think, but knowing how to deal with the frailties of office egos.

Keep confidential information where it belongs.

What you see and hear in your boss's office stays there. Build a reputation as someone capable of holding sensitive information. Earn the trust and confidence of your boss.

Expect delays and obstacles.

They inevitably interfere with goal accomplishment. Rule of thumb: double the hours estimated for a project. If you deliver on time or early, all the better.

Know your organization.

Before you can really get things done, you have to really know your organization. You have to know your boss, your boss' boss, their peers and your peers. It takes studying, asking questions and most importantly documenting the answers. In my book, "Climbing the Corporate Ladder-Safely!" I document this process in detail.

Small company CEOs

Oddly, after years and years of learning the politics of organizations, I now work for a small private equity company with virtually no politics. I have had to learn to speak the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, the cold hard facts.

I've learned CEOs are different in small companies. They really want to get it done and get it done right. They want to make sure that they are not putting themselves or their colleagues in harm's way financially or otherwise. They have a lot of "skin in the game." If they fail they will lose a lot more than CEOs at large companies. So when we offer solutions that solve their problems, or take some ancillary function (insurance) off their plate, they jump for joy, literally.

They aren't ignorant, they just don't have the years of EHS and risk management experience I have, nor have they made the mistakes I've committed. It's all about learning from past mistakes. They benefit from our mistakes as we assist our CEOs with:

EHS and insurance due diligence. This primarily includes acquisitions and divestitures. From an EHS standpoint we look for ways to comply with the regulatory requirements and leverage them in the process. From an insurance standpoint we determine if they are under/over insured and if there are any gaps.

EHS management. With so many years of program implementation, this is easy. The hard part is not overwhelming the CEO with huge volumes of paper.

Risk management. We benchmark against other companies of similar size and exposure. We provide more cost-effective solutions and broader coverage. Who wouldn't want that? We also assist in managing claims so that the CEO can sleep better at night.

Emerging events. We keep abreast of emerging events, from local, state, and federal current events. This includes, regulatory, newsworthy items, litigation, exposures, etc. We inform the CEO in short blasts.

Contractor management. We assist with helping evaluate contractors and Master Service Agreements (MSAs).

Interestingly, my career has morphed from safety engineer, to safety manager, to EHS director, to vice president and finally executive EHS / risk management coach and subject matter expert. I have the privilege of helping our CEOs (parent company and clients), all of whom "get it" when it comes to EHS and risk management. How much better can it get?

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