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**Harvard
Business
Review**

Interpersonal Communication

5 Ways to Influence Up in the Workplace

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March 28, 2022



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Summary. When you enter a company as a new manager, you often have a fresh perspective. You may see gaps that others don't, and have ideas for how to improve systems, processes, or projects. Even so, you can't create any positive change without first getting your boss on board. How can you influence up and get your great ideas noticed?

- Focus on how your objectives support organizational goals. If you can convince your boss that your idea is going to help them do their job better, look better to senior management, or support the organization's larger mission, then you can get your idea greenlit.
- Conduct a thorough cost/risk-benefit analysis and lay this information out in a logical way. If you can tell a clear story about why the benefits of your idea outweigh both the costs and the risks, decision-makers will have a hard time disagreeing with you.

- Problem-solve with your boss. Come up with a few questions to ask your boss so that they feel involved in the process. Their high-level direction and guidance can help you arrive at a better course of action, and save you hours of time and effort.
- If your boss just doesn't have the time to problem-solve with you, or isn't available to offer their agreement or consent, take an "unless directed otherwise" approach. Send your boss an email sharing background on the issue and say, "Unless directed otherwise, I intend to [*state your solution*]." [close](#)

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What stands between you and your ability to solve problems or create change within your organization? For new managers, sometimes it's not a lack of knowledge, resources, or time — but rather, the inability to gain buy-in from a more senior executive.

You may know exactly what needs to get done — whether it involves addressing a culture issue or enacting a new initiative for your team — but your boss just isn't on board. At best, they're disinterested, and at worst, they're extremely difficult to convince. So, what do you do in these situations to successfully move forward with a course of action?

You could go the “ask for forgiveness, not permission” route (take action now and accept whatever consequences show up later), but this strategy often backfires. You could do nothing, but failing to act on what you believe is in the best interest of your team will likely leave you in a state of frustration. Fortunately, there is a third choice: You can use influence to persuade your boss that your perspective is worth supporting.

Here are five ways to “influence up” so that you can get aligned with your boss and make a greater impact.

1) Focus on how your objectives support organizational goals.

It’s hard to say “no” to someone who ties their objectives directly to your goals. If you can convince your boss that your idea is going to help them do their job better, look better to senior management, or support the organization’s larger mission, then you can get your idea greenlit.

Before you bring a solution or initiative to the table, do your homework to establish how it will support what your boss or the company wants to accomplish. Then, when presenting or discussing your idea with your boss, explicitly highlight those points.

For example, let's say you want to launch a new social media channel to help your team reach a new audience. Before bringing this to your boss, ask yourself:

- What will launching this channel help us accomplish?
- What are my boss's goals?
- What are the goals of the organization?

Look at your answers to these questions and note any alignments. Perhaps your boss is tasked with helping your company appeal to younger clientele, which is a part of the organization's strategy to launch their latest product. Knowing this, you could persuade your boss that your idea is a good one by proving that young people spend a large amount of time on this social media channel, and launching your brand on this channel will help you get your new product in front of them.

Whatever your argument, use stats and evidence to back it up and strengthen your case.

2) Emphasize how the benefits outweigh the costs and risks.

Pushback often stems from risk aversion. Your initiative may be in direct alignment with your boss's goals — but when there's risk involved, it might eclipse any potential benefit in their mind.

That's why you need to conduct a thorough cost/risk-benefit analysis up front so you can clearly dissect and explain the stakes to your boss.

If you can lay this information out in a logical way, telling a clear story about why the benefits outweigh both the costs and the risks, decision-makers will have a hard time disagreeing with you, and it will be much easier for them to understand and support your perspective.

For instance, sticking with our original example, maybe your boss already believes that a new social media channel would be a low-cost way to help your team reach a new audience, but they're concerned that your product will be negatively received by some users, and that their negative feedback may be amplified and shared widely on this platform. If you're aware of this concern, you could acknowledge the risk up front and then explain how you plan to address it to ensure that the pros outweigh the cons:

- Acknowledge that there is always a risk of encountering negative sentiment on social media, but this is a concern every business faces and you plan to moderate comments.
- Explain that your team is conducting user research so you can present your product in a digestible and engaging way that you believe will resonate positively on the platform,

generate excitement, and minimize incidental negative comments.

- Additionally, you may try to flip their concern by explaining that any critical feedback you receive will help you increase brand loyalty by transparently owning and responding to customer concerns — something highly valued by your target clientele.

When laying out the benefits versus the costs and risks associated with your proposed course of action, focus on presenting your views as objectively as possible and back them up with research when able. Not only will this ensure you present a balanced view, but it will also enhance your boss's confidence in your judgment, which will pay dividends the next time you seek their buy-in.

3) Problem-solve with your boss.

While coming to your boss with a strong initial pitch is important, it can also be helpful to leave some room for their input. You should be able to defend your idea with evidence and research (as noted above), but it's okay if there are still some gray areas that you're working out. In fact, it's to your benefit to openly acknowledge these. If you can approach your boss as you would a mentor and problem-solve together early on, you're more likely to gain their buy-in and avoid unanticipated speed bumps, both of which will help you get things done in an efficient manner.

During your conversation with your boss, come up with a few questions to ask so that they feel involved in the process. Most likely, they'll offer some insights based on past experiences. Their high-level direction and guidance can help you arrive at a better course of action, and save you hours of time and effort. Think of it as an opportunity to generate alignment, enhance trust, and create a sharper solution through a collaborative effort.

Turning back to our example, let's say you know your boss is supportive of your social media channel idea in theory, but they're skeptical about how it will practically play out to help move the needle for your new product. Although your concept isn't fully baked yet, you could schedule some problem-solving time with your boss and begin the conversation with, "I know we're both generally excited about this idea, but one specific area that I'm wrestling with is what our strategic communication messaging should be to differentiate us from the competition. Based on your experience and expertise, do you have any perspectives on this?"

More often than not, your boss will appreciate the opportunity to weigh in. Once they do, they're more likely to support the idea because they had a part in shaping it.

4) Adopt an “unless directed otherwise” mindset.

If your boss just doesn't have the time to problem-solve with you, or isn't available to offer their agreement or consent, taking an “unless directed otherwise” approach is a smart way of indirectly asking for permission without actually asking for permission.

Here's how it works: Send your boss an email sharing background on the issue and say, “Unless directed otherwise, I intend to [*state your solution*].”

Applying this technique to our social media channel scenario, your email might look something like this:

[*Boss's name*], I've given some thought to how we can appeal to younger clientele with our new product, and have discussed several options with key stakeholders throughout the company. Unless directed otherwise, I intend to launch a new social media channel on [*platform*] to begin generating excitement around our brand with this new audience. I'm working with [*director's name*] in PR on our communication strategy, and will keep you posted on next steps.

Now, the ball is in your boss's court. At this point, they can either:

1. Tell you to wait until the two of you can discuss the issue further.

2. Offer some things to think about and clear you to proceed.
3. Say nothing.

Assuming your boss has had reasonable time to respond, silence implies consent. If they say nothing by the end of the next business day (or whatever your team norm is for expected email response time), you can move forward at full steam to execute your initiative.

The opposite of influencing up would have been to ask: “What do you think I should do about this problem?” Instead, you’ve shown initiative by presenting the challenge and your solution. The onus is now on your boss to make a move — or, by remaining silent, give their implied consent.

5) As a last resort, ask probing questions.

While the previous four techniques assume your boss is reasonable, perhaps you’re dealing with a manager so difficult that these strategies couldn’t possibly influence them. But it’s not impossible to influence difficult personalities — it just takes a different approach. In this case, consider asking questions that can spark them to rethink their views.

Wharton business school organizational psychologist Adam Grant recently shared some useful examples of how Apple team members were able to influence their notoriously difficult boss,

Steve Jobs. In one instance, Jobs had long insisted that he would never develop a smartphone but reversed his decision after his team asked him if he thought rival Microsoft would ever develop one. By asking questions that tapped into his competitive nature instead of inserting their opinions, his team was able to influence up and ultimately position Apple to become the most valuable company in the world.

A few questions you might ask your own boss are:

- What is the source of your hesitation around this idea?
- What are our competitors doing in this area?
- If we were to change the way we're approaching this issue, what would that look like?

By persuading decision-makers about the value and benefits of a solution, problem-solving with them, taking the initiative, and asking the right questions, it's possible to influence up to create meaningful change in your organization. If your boss ends up changing your mind instead, it will foster a relationship of mutual influenceability, and that's a powerful collaborative force.

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