

# How To Manage Your Boss

Mark Nevins Contributor 

*I work with senior leaders to help them grow as quickly as their businesses*

Follow



Oct 31, 2022, 07:13pm EDT

In 1980, *The Harvard Business Review* published an [article by Professors Jack Gabarro and John Kotter](#) with the somewhat paradoxical title “Managing Your Boss.”

Can you really manage your boss? Should you even try? Gabarro and Kotter answered both questions with an unequivocal “yes”—and, furthermore, they asserted that people who *don't* manage their bosses usually don't achieve great results and/or are not recognized for their results.

While more than 40 years old, the core lessons of this article are timeless, and every leader should read it once a year. **The reality is, to be effective in your job as an executive, you cannot count on your boss to set the terms for a productive working relationship.** Rather, you must work to understand your boss's work style and preferences; her strengths and weaknesses; and her goals and expectations. No matter how good a boss she is, she is acutally *depending on you* to do these things.

Managing your boss is not “sucking up”: it is establishing a mutually dependent relationship that will lead to clear alignment on goals, meaningful understanding and communication, and effective execution.

Advice on establishing a productive relationship with your boss shows up in books written for leaders taking on new roles or starting new jobs—for example, George Bradt's *The New Leader's 100-Day Action Plan* and Michael Watkins's *The First 90 Days*. While it is important to have “critical conversations” in taking on a new position, those conversations shouldn't happen only when you are starting a new job.

**Holistic, structured conversations with your boss about *how you are working together* (not just on metrics and tactics) should happen on a regular basis, at least once a quarter. This goes for**

## **first-line people managers with their bosses as it does for CEOs and their Chairs.**

What should these holistic, structured conversations cover? I propose five important topics or areas, and while this list is not exhaustive it has the benefits of being simple and a good starting point. Each of these topics is “open” enough that it should encourage dialogue and prevent the all-too-common error of focusing on the urgent rather than the important:

**1. VISION:** “*Where* are we going, and *why*?” Vision basically comes down to being able to articulate the story of your business with impact and relevance, and it should be considered from the point of view of different stakeholders and audiences. What’s the story? Why should anyone care? Has it changed? *Should* it change, given broader changes in the industry or world? You must be clear on how Vision will be communicated meaningfully for the organization, for the marketplace and customers, and for shareholders. Are you and your boss telling the same story, in a consistent way, even as you each bring your own distinct perspective and passion to it?

**2. GOALS:** “*What* are we going to do to achieve our Vision?” Are you and your boss mutually clear on your objectives and how progress will be assessed and measured? Does your roadmap make sense? How will you deal with threats or opportunities? Have you ensured that you share the same priorities, and that you are effectively engaging support across the organization and cutting through politics? Goals should be framed in both the longer-term and the near-term: yes, there should be a three-year plan, but you and your boss should also be able to describe “what success looks like” at the end of this current year and the current quarter. Without being overly manipulative, remember that you have to set expectations and then manage those expectations in order to be able to declare victory!

**3. ALIGNMENT:** “*How* are we going to accomplish those Goals?” While it has become an overused term, Alignment is all about clarity in execution. Alignment follows from Goals, and has to do with how you and your organization make progress toward your objectives. Under this umbrella you might also address how you are engaging the broader organization and team; how decisions are made; and how conflict is resolved (between the two of you, and between you and your peers). Assessing Alignment is also a way to gauge commitment, negotiate for resources, and explore important questions such as managing trade-offs and dealing with unexpected turns of event. Finally, an Alignment conversation can be a good way to discuss talent and performance: are we on the same page about who our stars and non-performers are?

4. **CADENCE:** “*When*, and how often, should we be touching base to achieve the right rhythm?” Cadence is fundamentally the way you and your boss work together, and there’s no right answer other than what works best for the two of you. How often do you meet—and is that frequently enough? Do you both feel you have enough access to each other; that you are spending your time together on the right things; and that the level of give-and-take is appropriate? Are expectations on both sides clear, and are the needs of both sides being met? Many of these questions seem fairly mundane and trivial, and some bosses or their direct reports will say, “It’s fine, we run into each other a few times a day” or “He’ll reach out if he needs me.” But without regular, structured dialogue with your boss you may fail to stay ahead of the strategic issues, and you risk facing an awkward and unproductive conversation when there is a crisis or problem.

5. **RELATIONSHIP:** “*Who* are we as people, and how will understanding each other better provide context, grounding, and personal meaning for all of the above?” This final touch-point is about “the soft stuff,” but by now we should all have learned that the soft stuff is often the hard stuff. Talking about the Relationship means addressing style and preferences; communication and persona; and, ultimately, trust. This conversation also brings the dialogue full circle, back to Vision: “What are we trying to do *together*, and why will realizing our vision matter to us?” If Cadence is about the “transactional” aspects of your bond with your boss, Relationship gets at the “non-transactional” aspects: remember, the more senior you get in any organization, the more you accomplish via non-transactional relationships. And, of course, if you establish a strong relationship with your boss, she will be more likely to give you honest feedback and invest in your development.

Unfortunately, “VGACR” doesn’t form a memorable acronym, but if you can keep these five focal areas in mind and revisit them with your boss on a regular basis, you will find that your working relationship becomes much stronger and more productive.

Tee up this kind of conversation once a quarter; it doesn’t have to be formal or structured, and in many cases these kinds of dialogues happen best over breakfast or during a flight together. Leading the conversational dance with the person you report to is one of the best and most effective ways of “Managing Your Boss.”

And one last thing: If you find that this kind of conversation works well with your own boss, wouldn’t it make a lot of sense to teach your direct reports how to do the same with you?