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Hacks: Your Boss Is Not Your Friend

What Do Popular TV Shows Have to Do with Your Work Relationships?



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254



2



This article is one of a series about how to build a relationship with your manager that gets you what you want on the job when you want it. You'll find links to the other articles at the bottom.

The content is based on [Help Your Boss Help You](#) by Ken Kousen, published by The Pragmatic Bookshelf.

TV Boss / Employee Relationships

The other day my wife and I finished the HBO Max series [Hacks](#), which involves the relationship between the aging, legendary comic Deborah Vance (played by [Jean Smart](#)) and young, entitled writer Ava (played by [Hannah Einbinder](#)). The show is smart and funny and a darling of the critics, who currently give it 100 percent on the Tomatometer at [Rotten Tomatoes](#). The relationship between the two women is complicated and rather dark, but the characters are fully three-dimensional. It's a great show and I look forward to the second season, whenever that comes.



Photograph by [Jake Giles Netter/HBO Max](#)

There are ten episodes, and I'm not going to spoil them, but you won't be surprised to learn that their growing, mother/daughter surrogate relationship is the heart of the show. From it, I need to make two points:

1. Jean Smart is brilliant, and this part gives her a chance to really shine. Seriously, she steals every scene she's in, and she's already the star of the show. It's not like she wasn't already well-known, but if ever the term break-out star could be applied to someone in their late 60s who you already know, this is the actor and this is the role.
2. Over and over I felt compelled to recite a phrase that has practically become one of my mantras: *Your boss is not your friend.*

I'm trying to avoid spoilers, so for the details you'll have to watch the show to see how Deborah Vance makes this point for me, though I do say a bit more about *Hacks* before the end of this post.

In any *hierarchical organization*, you almost certainly have to deal with a direct, line manager. That person gives performance reviews, argues for promotions, and assigns you to projects. In the IT and engineering worlds where I have spent most of my career, that job is often called a *people manager*, as opposed to a *team lead*, meaning they view management as their primary career and are hoping to rise through the ranks of the organization that way. *

We'll talk about the challenges of so-called *flat organizations*, as opposed to hierarchical, in another post in this series.

Unfortunately, whenever popular media depicts hierarchical organizations, they don't work the way they do in real life. For one thing, everyone involved is a working Hollywood actor, which means they have a certain minimum level of attractiveness (which qualifies as *stunning* for the rest of humanity), combined with enough charm to be hired above all the other competing actors (again, equating to *staggering amounts of charisma* for the rest of us), combined with a huge amount of talent. Making a living as a Hollywood actor is almost impossible, so the people who make it are by definition extraordinary.

Talent is hard to define. Most of us see actors in relation only to others at the same level, so it's also easy to underestimate. I would argue that an average Hollywood actor is better at acting than I have ever been at anything in my entire life.

Another problem with depicting office environments on TV is that nobody ever leaves because then the actor would have to leave the show. I like to call this the ***Riker Problem***, named after Commander William Riker on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.

Commander Riker should have been promoted to Captain many times during the series, but then the actor, Jonathan Frakes, would have had to leave the show, or at least seen his role diminished substantially. So instead the writers kept coming up with increasingly unlikely reasons for him to stay. They even made a whole subplot out of that dilemma in the episode S3E26: Best of Both Worlds, where they blamed his failure to advance on him being too happy in his current post. In that two-part episode, he gets a field promotion to Captain, saves the Federation from the Borg, rescues Captain Picard, and is rewarded by being demoted back to Commander.

Sorry about going on a rant about a 30-year-old television show. If you want to roll your eyes and throw an “OK, Boomer” my way, I have no defense.

In business environments depicted on television, nobody ever leaves, or if they do, there’s a major episode around it with lots of tears and special goodbyes.

The real world isn’t like that at all. In the real world, people move around all the time. Sometimes you find out about departures only when you ask for people and discover they’re no longer with the company.

Real Office Relationships

On TV, all the team members not only become friends (even ones who initially start out as hostile), they become family. Their manager even turns into the kind of idealized parent that the writers always wanted.

The parental transformation is true even if the behavior borders on abusive, like with Jethro Gibbs on NCIS. In real life, his first head slap would get him a meeting with HR, and the second would get him fired. And he'd deserve it.

The problem is, in real life, *your boss is not your friend*, and certainly not your parent. In real life, you have a professional relationship with your manager, and if that relationship isn't working, you either try to fix it or move to a different position.

We'll explore ways you can try to fix the relationship in another post in this series. Right now, let's focus on the traps that you can fall into if you think of your boss as your friend. Consider the professional relationship between you and your manager.

You have an agenda for your job, your career, and your life. *So does your manager.*

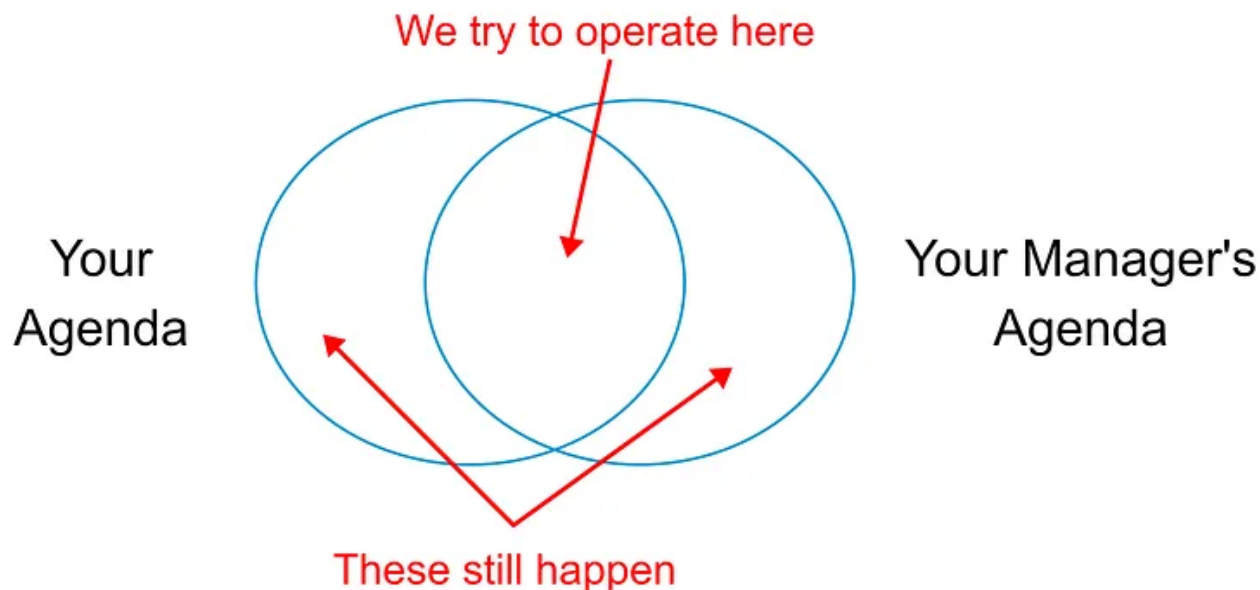


Image by the author, [Ken Kousen](#)

There is an overlap between what you want and what your manager wants, or you wouldn't be working together in the first place. The overlap isn't perfect. Sometimes you want something good for yourself that doesn't fit your manager's goals or priorities, and sometimes your manager feels the same way. Because the two of you are rewarded differently, some conflict is inevitable and worth preparing for ahead of time.

Two Traps

You don't need to introduce potential conflicts unnecessarily, but that's what can happen if you treat your boss as your friend. If you think your boss is your friend, two problems often emerge.

Trap One

The first time your boss makes a decision that goes against you, you're going to be *surprised* and you're going to be *hurt*.

If your first reaction to a decision by your manager is, "but I thought you were my friend!" you've fallen into that trap.

Say you wanted to be assigned to a particular project. The project has high visibility, so if you can handle it successfully, it may lead to a promotion. It's a challenge because it requires skills you either don't have or only recently acquired, but you're confident you can figure out what you need with a bit of help. It will be a great learning opportunity for you, especially since there are others already on the project who have the skills you'd like to learn. You've told your manager you want the assignment.

For some reason, your boss doesn't give you the project.

Why were you bypassed? Your boss may have a number of reasons that fit their professional agenda and not yours. Here are some reasons that may have gone through your boss's mind:

- You don't have a background in that area.
- Your current workload won't allow you to handle new tasks and existing tasks.
- The project itself is very risky. You'd be affected if the project failed. (Your boss protecting you.)
- Another project is in the pipeline that will contribute to your professional growth but isn't open for discussion yet.

It could be any or all of these reasons, and despite the impact on you personally, *the decision isn't personal*.

I don't know about you, but I need emotional distance to view the relationship as a professional one rather than a personal one. I need to protect myself so that when my manager does something I don't like, I don't see it as a betrayal by a friend.

Trap Two

You tell your boss things you normally reserve for friends.

For example, your boss comes by in the morning and greets you.

“How did your weekend go?” they ask. “Is the family okay?”

If you think your boss is your friend, you’ll answer honestly.

“Not too bad,” you say, “but my wife is not happy that I’m spending so much time at the office. She’s busy at work too, and it’s hard to spend enough quality time with the kids, especially while they’re young. We’re working on it.”

Your boss was considering you for that major, highly visible project you said you wanted, but now they hesitate. That project is a major commitment by itself. If you think of your boss as your friend, they may feel the same way. As a friend, they’re concerned about what you just said. After all, they don’t want to cause you any more trouble at home. That wouldn’t be the act of a friend.

You don’t want your boss thinking along those lines. When you tell them about personal issues, you don’t want them taking those issues into account when they make business decisions that affect your career. They might withhold the assignment you want or the promotion you’re aiming for while thinking they’re doing you a favor. *Yikes.*

Being Friendly Without Being Friends

You don't have to formally declare to your boss that you're not friends in order to avoid these traps. The boundaries you need to maintain are internal, not external. You don't have to say them out loud.

As long as you know your boss is not your friend, and that the vast majority of decisions they make are professional rather than personal, it's a lot easier to handle decisions that don't go your way.

Most of my day job is teaching technical training courses in software development. I'm a one-person company, so I think of my clients and my partners as my managers, because the same relationship principles apply.

One of my clients runs a training company based in Atlanta, and the head of that company is a very friendly person. Whenever I'm in town, I let him know and we meet for dinner and drinks. We tell jokes, share stories about what's happened recently, and talk about what we believe is going on in the industry. A good time is had by all.

The entire time we're together, however, a voice in the back of my head keeps repeating, "your boss is not your friend" over and over.

I need to repeat that mantra because I know this guy really well, and I know he'll make business decisions that help him without hesitating, even if they negatively affect me. His business-driven decisions are partly why he's successful in a highly competitive industry.

For example, one time he asked me to teach a particular class on a particular date. I responded right away and told him I knew most of the subject matter, but I had to check some topics in the outline. Also, I had a tentative conflict

with another client and needed a couple of days to find out if I was truly available.

He agreed to give me two days. I came back to him at the end of that time and said that I'd gotten out of the other commitment and I thought I could handle the course.

He told me he gave it to someone else. He apologized, of course, but said that his client needed a decision quickly and another trainer became available, so he felt compelled to give the class away. He was really sorry, but he had to do it.

Fortunately, by this time, I knew he wasn't my friend, at least not where business decisions were concerned. I told him I understood, thanked him for the opportunity, and wished him the best.



Image by By [Lucky Team Studio](#) on [Shutterstock](#)

The decision wasn't personal. It was strictly business. I did what was best for my company, and he did the same.

The way he behaved told me something about the way he did business, and that did affect our professional relationship in the long run, but that's a different story. The important thing was that I was emotionally prepared. I avoided the emotional investment that comes with true friendship, and that made it much easier to move on. I was annoyed, but that's about it.

Bringing all this back to the TV show *Hacks*, Deborah Vance is a veteran performer who has survived a brutal industry, but who needs to change in order to stay successful. Ava is a classic entitled millennial (even though she's really Gen-Z, as she points out). Their business relationship gets off to a rocky start but grows naturally as they get to know each other. Eventually, Ava really does start to see Deborah as a mother-like figure who is way better than her actual mother, and Deborah sees in Ava the daughter she rather wished she had rather than the one she actually has.

The relationship runs into trouble, because (1) this is television and you need drama for the characters to show who they are and to grow, and (2) your boss is not your friend. Both sides are at fault, at least to a degree, but as with any employer/employee relationship, there is a real power imbalance involved. Deborah isn't Ava's mother, she's her employer. Ava's entire career depends on Deborah's good will. If Ava messes up (and she does), Deborah can simply fire her, and that's that.

As you watch *Hacks* or any other TV show, watch how often the interpersonal dynamics cross the boundaries of a professional relationship. Observe how much pain the employee could have saved by using our mantra: *your boss is not your friend*.

Most importantly, keep that in mind in your real job. There's nothing wrong with being friendly — that is actually part of being a professional. Conflicts will emerge naturally, so there's no reason to provoke them. But keep in mind in all interactions with your manager, your boss is not your friend.

Feel free to disagree with any or all of this article. I'm speaking from my own experiences, and, as they say, *your mileage may vary*. I harp on this point a lot because I spent years making this mistake, so I'm sensitive to it. If it's not

relevant to you, then thank your lucky stars and move on to other issues. But if the issue is relevant, try to protect yourself. The emotional stress and anxiety you save will be your own. Remember: *your boss is not your friend*.

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