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Why Your Manager Is So Bad

How to Build a Constructive Loyalty Relationship

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The first step toward building a constructive relationship is understanding.

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 <u>Help Your Boss Help You</u> *by Ken Kousen, published by The Pragmatic Bookshelf. Hint: read to the end of the article for a promo code.*

Good managers are a joy to work for. A good manager fights organizational battles on your behalf. A good manager represents you in meetings so you don't have to go, thereby providing you with the isolation you need to do your job without the constant interruptions and distractions. A good manager gets you the resources you need without constantly forcing you to justify small expenditures. A good manager stands up for you when problems arise, either from issues that arise outside your group or because you made a mistake and need an ally.

Working for a good manager is easy. You don't need advice on how to work for good managers, because if you do something they don't like, they'll tell you. Good managers assume it's part of their job to give you the benefit of their experiences about what has worked best for them in the past, and what they expect in the future.

If you are lucky enough to have a good manager, enjoy it, because:

- It's rare.

- It won't last.

Truly good managers — those who may someday rise through the ranks to the C-level suite — are ambitious and are always looking for the next opportunity. A really good manager wants to learn as much about the

company as possible, so they can handle as wide a range of challenges as they can. To get promoted to executive levels, a manager has to understand many aspects of the company, including finance, marketing, and sales, in addition to handling technical people. If your manager is good enough to climb the ladder to the top, they're not going to stay in one place very long.
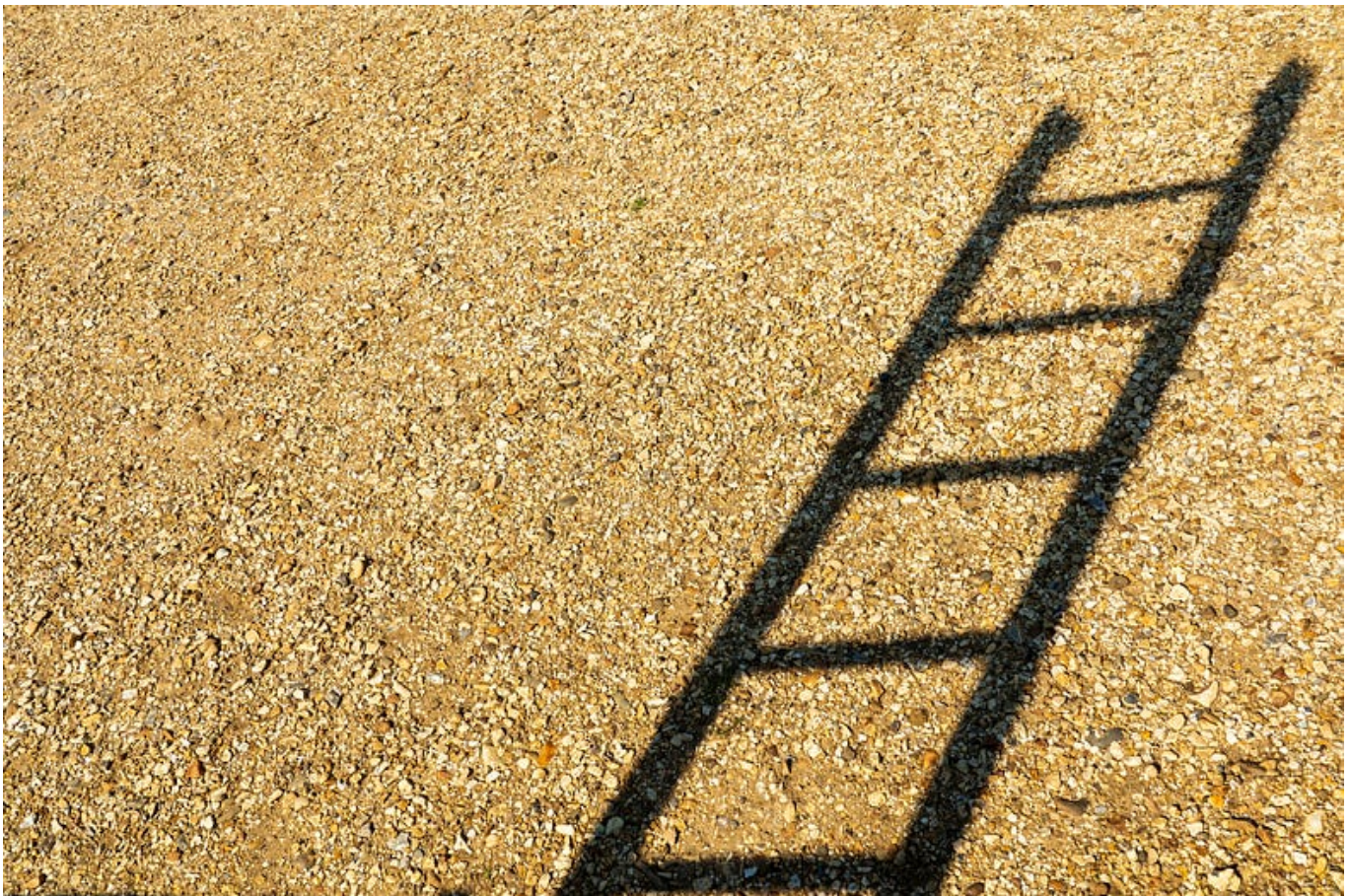
Not-Yets and Never-Will-Bes

Photo by Nick Fewings on Unsplash

One reason we encounter good managers so rarely is that as working professionals, we're not on a managerial career path.

That means the managers we normally deal with are at the bottom rung of the corporate ladder.

Unfortunately, that means that as technical people, we often deal with managers who are:

- The least experienced

- The least proficient

Sometimes managers come from the technical ranks and were promoted into a management position, which accounts for their lack of training and experience.

Managers at the lowest level of the managerial hierarchy have very little power, influence, or resources. They're also either rookies still trying to figure out how to do the job, or veterans who never were able to advance. Either way, we're not dealing with the best of the best.

Worse, these managers know their shortcomings. The Dunning-Kruger Effect describes people with very little ability who think of themselves as experts despite all evidence to the contrary, but most people aren't like that. In fact, most people tend to underrate their own abilities, and while it may be hard to believe, managers are people too.

Experts and Imposter Syndrome

Experts often don't think of themselves as experts. I have a friend who liked to say, "All the math I know is arithmetic."

She often said this while working on a complicated numerical analysis of nonlinear partial differential equations. Experts spend most of their time on hard problems, so they're constantly facing the limits of their abilities. Problems they already know how to solve appear easy by contrast. For example, experienced Java developers forget how tough it is to make the transition to object-oriented programming. But one of the hardest training classes to teach is *Introduction to Java* because the mental leap from procedural programming to OOP is huge.

In extreme cases, the insecurity and self-doubt that arises as a normal part of learning anything new can manifest itself as <u>imposter syndrome</u>, where sufferers believe they are frauds who are constantly in danger of being exposed. Most people experience imposter syndrome to some degree, though we don't normally let it keep us from doing our jobs.

Inexperienced managers know enough to know they're not good at their jobs. Any tinge of imposter syndrome further erodes their ability to manage effectively.

Fake It Until You Make It

To make matters worse, managers have to act like they know what they're doing, even when they know they don't.

Let's be clear, though — we all have to *fake it until we make it*. If you don't act like you're good at your job, nobody will trust you to do it. Coworkers, clients, even (and maybe especially) your manager need to believe you can handle your job. <u>Help Your Boss Help You</u> contains two whole chapters dedicated to two messages you want to send to your manager:

- I got this

- I got your back

"I got this," is a way of saying you'll handle whatever problems arise. We'll talk in detail about both messages in future posts.

Technical people produce evidence that they can do the job. Coders write code, doctors treat patients, and lawyers file briefs. But what do managers produce, other than project reports? Have you ever read a project report? I spent twelve years in a major organization where, if you went only by the end-of-year project reports, every single project was successful — and that's *ridiculous.* Projects fail all the time, but there's always a way to make them look successful on paper.

"Sure, the project didn't achieve its goals, but we learned the following skills: x, y, and z; we acquired the following hardware and software: a, b, and c; we repaired technical debt; we built relationships; we formed a plan we now believe to be the right way to go; all for the low, low price of …."

Managers have to act confident. They have to persuade technical people to follow decisions based on less knowledge and experience than their own direct reports possess. That's a tough hurdle for experienced managers, much less rookies and never-will-bes. Combined with the fact that those managers lack power, and is it any wonder that technical professionals have a low opinion of management in general?

Building a Constructive Loyalty Relationship

Photo by Dave Lowe on Unsplash

So if your manager isn't good at their job, lacks the power to solve problems, and acts like they know more than they actually do, how do you work with them productively? How can you build a relationship that gets you what you want when you want it?

The first step is to acknowledge that for all their faults, your manager has the most influence on your career of anyone in the organization. It's vital to make that relationship productive because while they may not be able to do much for you, they can certainly do a lot against you, either deliberately or by not working hard on your behalf.

The idea is to build a relationship based on constructive loyalty. The goal is to build a trust relationship for both sides. Remember this is a professional

relationship — not friends, not family — nothing more than a respectful relationship that tries to satisfy both sides for as long as you work together.

At the beginning of this article, we talked about what you want from a manager. What do they want from you? Your manager's wants are about *trust*:

- They trust you to *do your job* to the best of your ability.

- They trust you to *tell them when problems arise,* early enough to do something about them if possible.

- They trust you to *support their decisions,* at least publicly.

Doing your job does not mean you know how to do everything at the beginning. It means you take responsibility for your job tasks. The second point is to keep your manager informed of developments, especially if they require re-planning the tasks.

Finally, and this is the hardest part if you lack respect for your manager, *they need you to support their decisions.* You can still argue with them in private so as not to disrupt the loyalty relationship, but as far as the rest of the world is concerned, you're a team and the decisions were made and executed that way.

In many of the articles in this series, we'll discuss how to build a constructive loyalty relationship. The task will involve giving good enough answers so you can be responsive to your manager's requests. You'll see ways to push back against decisions you don't like. You'll also learn to avoid actions that will disrupt the relationship, like bypassing the chain of command or thinking of

the boss as your friend rather than just your manager. You'll even get strategies for coping when your boss refuses to learn or is truly unethical.

The first step to building a constructive loyalty relationship is understanding and empathizing with your manager. If you acknowledge the constraints they are under and the forces that drive them to act a particular way, you'll be better able to understand why they do what they do. Everything starts from understanding.

You'll also come to understand why managers appear to be so bad at their jobs. Keep in mind that building a constructive loyalty relationship is a long-term goal. If you understand why they do what they do, and you can build a productive relationship around it, you will become a very valuable employee — someone they really want to keep around. The primary objective is for your manager to take your needs and your career goals into account when they make decisions, which is what a professional relationship is all about.

More Wisdom From Help Your Boss Help You

If you enjoyed this article, you may also enjoy the following articles, which are based on the concepts from *Help Your Boss Help You* by Ken Kousen:

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