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# Bypassing the Chain of Command

## Don't Turn a Simple Objection Into a Career-Threatening Move

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Say you are a technical professional, reporting to a low-level manager who knows far less than you do. You recommend a particular approach to solving a technical problem. Your manager rejects it and insists on taking a different path. In response, you decide to go to your manager's boss and appeal the decision.

This is a trap. Not only will you almost certainly *not* get what you want, you're likely to look bad to both your boss and your boss's boss, and severely damage the loyalty relationship with your own manager.

### Asking for Trouble

Consider an example from popular media. In *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (ST:TNG), the season three finale episode was called "The Best of Both

Worlds," and is still considered one of the best in the entire run of the show. In case you don't remember it, here are the basics.


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The Enterprise responds to a distress call at one of the Federation's outermost colonies, and when they get there they find only a giant hole in the ground. The damage suggests that the colony was attacked by the Borg, their most powerful enemy. To investigate, an admiral travels to the Enterprise, bringing along his protegé, Commander Shelby, played by Elizabeth Dennehy.

Shelby is brilliant, energetic, and extremely ambitious. She is a hot-shot young commander on the rise.

Of course, as fans of the show are aware, the Enterprise already has a hot-shot, (somewhat) young commander on the rise: Commander Riker, played by William Frakes.

At this point in the series, the show is already struggling with the fact that Riker deserves a promotion, which he doesn't want to take because that would mean the actor would have to leave the show, but that's a different issue. The fact that Shelby thinks she's always right, she sees Riker as being in the way, and would rather take her recommendations directly to the captain, is the real problem.

Shelby suggests a strategy that Riker rejects as too risky.

> *"I think the Captain should make that decision," she says.*
>
> *"I bring all the options to the Captain," Riker replies.*

Riker thinks the conversation is over, but in the very next scene, we see Shelby in the Captain's ready room as Riker enters. He sees her and visibly sighs. She went around him, as we are so often tempted to do.

In the episode, Captain Picard backed up Riker, though he allowed for Shelby's suggestion to be considered a fall-back plan. This was a risky move on his part because, while he did support his direct subordinate, he also effectively rewarded Shelby for violating the chain of command. By doing this, Captain Picard virtually ensured the situation would repeat itself the next time Shelby was unhappy.

That result is about as favorable to the employee making the appeal as it is ever likely to be. The odds of you getting such a favorable result are far more

remote. Normally the boss's boss will simply confirm your boss's decision, and then, after you've left unhappy and unsatisfied, you will become the subject of a rather unpleasant conversation between two of the people with the highest direct impact on your career. That's almost certainly not what you wanted.

Remember, your boss's boss has an existing relationship with your boss, and you just inserted yourself into the middle of it.

**How Not to Break the Chain of Command**

Image by Md. Khalid Hossen on Shutterstock

Here's another example, this time from a real-life scenario.

In an article in *Forbes* entitled, "At age 25, Mark Cuban learned lessons about leadership that changed his life," Cuban describes his time as a young executive at Mellon Bank in Pittsburgh, where he got himself into trouble.

As he says in the article:

> *I took the initiative. I used to* ***send notes to the CEO*** *of the bank. … I'd* ***invite senior executives to a happy hour*** *to talk to a group of younger employees in*

> *their 20s like me. … I started **writing a newsletter**. I thought my boss would be happy.*
>
> *Instead, my boss called me into his office one day and ripped me a new one. "Who the f — — do you think you are?" he yelled. I told him I was trying to help Mellon make more money. He told me I was **never to go over him or around him, or he'd crush me**.*

The mistakes Cuban made are mistakes of ambition. He wanted the attention of higher executives, as many young, ambitious employees do. Those are rookie errors but are often forgivable in the business world.

The *real* mistake Cuban made was completely bypassing his own manager in the process, and then being surprised when his boss objected. The manager likely anticipated that sooner or later Cuban was going to make a real mistake, simply out of inexperience, and the manager would be condemned for it without even knowing what Cuban was doing.

The tone of the article in Forbes implied Cuban believed he was right all along. As you'll see in the article, Cuban was forced to part ways with that job. If you follow his lead, it is likely you'll damage your relationship with your boss so badly you'll have no choice but to leave the company.

## How to Appeal

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The irony is, in either case, there was a practical solution available. It won't work, in the sense that you still probably won't get what you want, but it will prevent massive damage to your career. Your only real option is to go through your boss, rather than around.

Consider the situation at the beginning of this post. You recommended a technical approach and your boss rejected it. The most you can do is say:

> *"I don't agree, and I'd like to bring this to <your boss's boss>."*
> *"Fine," your boss will (hopefully) say. "I'll go with you."*

Then you can go to the boss's manager. That person will almost certainly back up your boss, but at least this way you haven't violated the chain of command and you haven't damaged the loyalty relationship. Objecting isn't necessarily a bad thing. Most managers want to know what you honestly think. But as long as you say your piece and then get back to work, you'll be fine.

In Cuban's case, all he had to do was apologize to his manager and then say something like, "I want to bring more attention to the work our group is doing. I'd like to arrange a happy hour to meet the executives. I'd like to start a newsletter." And so on.

Then the manager could reply, "Happy hours are dicey these days, as executives have family lives and many people are not at their best when alcohol is involved. But there's a company picnic coming up soon and you can talk to them there. Also, <other employee> tried to start a newsletter a while ago; maybe we can work with her to try again."

In this version, the employee made the manager part of the process instead of bypassing them, as Cuban did. Cuban still may not have gotten what he wanted, but he may not have had to leave either — which seemed to be the only option in the scenario he described.

Note that this may not be the solution you want. When your boss overrules you, you'll probably just have to accept it. But you can express your objections, and even appeal the decision, without causing yourself serious problems later.

> 📝 The cases described here are not crises. If you see an issue that makes you feel morally or ethically compelled to be a whistleblower, so be it. Just don't expect to be rewarded for it. In fact, you'll probably have to leave the company, and maybe even the industry. So go that way only if you have no other choice.

Under normal circumstances, when working professionals feel their advice has been rejected, there is an enormous temptation to appeal to a higher

authority. If you feel the need to do so, try to go through the chain of command rather than around it.

Remember, your boss's boss already knows your boss. Now they're going to know you, too. Try not to turn a simple objection into a career-threatening move.

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