

The employee-to-boss equation mirrors the boss-to-employee equation.

I've written a lot in the last 15 months about how to be a good supervisor and leader. Leadership has been sorely tested by the coronavirus. So many decisions to make. So many worries. So many opportunities to upset patrons (e.g., the first-vaccinated crowd pounding on your door chanting "Open up!"). And supervisors are dealing with the same issues as a regular employee – child care at home; worries about family at risk; separation from friends and loved ones. All the while being responsible for a lot at work. *Just* like a typical library director, for instance. And a library director is very commonly a boss with a bevy of bosses – the board of trustees, complicating management in a myriad of ways.

### Managing your manager

To be clear, this is not a quick guide in cynicism and self-interest. Clawing your way up a hierarchy or "shining" on the job through insincerity, false praise, manipulation or undercutting others is very destructive.<sup>1</sup> Narcissism<sup>2</sup> is not a team-building trait. And it is, ultimately, terribly transparent. You will become *known* especially in a small place like Vermont.

Instead, you can be empathetic. You can learn about what supervisors learn about managing others. You can try flexing your emotional intelligence. Most importantly, managing your manager better will be a win for you, leading to better communication and a more personal, forgiving, and *human* workplace.

### A short list of how to enhance your relationship with your supervisor

I have been truly blessed with the wonderful employees that I have supervised over the years. Don't get me wrong, I have fired employees, too;

but on the balance, the scale tips heavily to the positive.

Here are a few things that I finally figured out, in retrospect, about how they helped me learn to supervise by *managing* me, their supervisor.

- **Keep goals and objectives in the front of your mind** – remember to connect what you do with the job you have, and then connect it to the organization's big goals. Everything you do is to support your team reaching its objectives. Make sure your boss knows this – help them connect the dots. It is good practice to formally meet at least quarterly to discuss progress towards objectives and goals. This is true even if you and the supervisor see each other every day. Take the initiative to set up these meetings. This will build your relationship.

THE QUEST TO BE A "GOOD EMPLOYEE" BY "MANAGING YOUR MANAGER" IS NOT BASED ON CYNICISM. IT IS SIMPLY THAT YOU ARE A GOOD EMPLOYEE, WHO, LIKE A GOOD SUPERVISOR, DOES THEIR LEVEL BEST, COMMUNICATES WELL, IS OPEN TO NEW IDEAS, RESPECTFULLY ASKS QUESTIONS, AND RECOGNIZES THE HUMANNESS IN OTHERS.

- **Know the metrics that matter** – this goes with goals and objectives. Get an understanding of what is important to the supervisor in your day-to-day work, and focus on what matters organizationally.
- **Communicate early** – if you don't know what is expected, ask. If you have come up against a roadblock in your work, talk about it with your boss. Don't wait; don't postpone

<sup>1</sup> A well-researched piece on unscrupulous human behavior-at-work that would make Niccolò Machiavelli proud. [Sabotage and Flattery: Two Tried-and-True Tricks to Getting Ahead at Work](#) by Dana Wilkie, October 10, 2019. Accessed May 11, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> A quick read on the harm of toxic self-interest in the workplace – [The Damage Done: Dealing with Narcissists in the Workplace](#) by Brian O'Connell, February 23, 2021.

communication. Early intervention in a small problem helps avoid later, bigger problems.

- **Empathy matters** - if you disagree with what matters at work such as a process that you think is awry, something that is undone but needs doing, even though the boss doesn't think it is important, speak up. Consider why your supervisor is deciding to do something and how they may be looking at it. Be empathetic to their point of view. A supervisor *loves* when an employee comes up with a good idea to do something better, easier, or when *not to do something*. A supervisor *really* loves it when an employee is constructive and brings ideas to the table. Unconstructive fault-finding is a lose-lose proposition.
- **Help them avoid surprises** – if you know about a situation or issue that your supervisor may not yet be aware of, present your information calmly and factually as a “heads-up.” This is especially important before the boss finds themselves in a public meeting or discussion, where withholding key information may put them (and perhaps you) in an uncomfortable position.
- **Help them learn** – I had an employee who would hand me a list when he would meet with me. He had items list that I knew about, of course, because they were active projects. But he also included “the boss needs to know about this” bullets. These included things that he saw on the horizon, and things that were bubbling in the background, starting to take some of his time. He helped me learn about what his job was about and the sometimes weird things he had to deal with, even after ten years together. I helped him say “no” to things, while he helped me say “yes” to others. Often we both said “no,” and sighed with relief. He helped me “cover his back” by knowing things – no surprises. If I said “Yes” to a work item, he knew I'd support him up and down the chain of command. Help your supervisor; help yourself.

SUPPORTING YOUR SUPERVISOR TAKES JUDGMENT AND SOME COURAGE, JUST AS IT DOES TO BE A SUPERVISOR. YOU MAY NOT ALWAYS GET IT RIGHT, BUT SINCERITY AND EMPATHY COUNT A GREAT DEAL IN THE EFFORT. AS YOU GO THROUGH YOUR CAREER, PEOPLE MAY NOT SPECIFICALLY RECALL WHAT YOU DID, BUT THEY WILL REMEMBER HOW YOU MADE THEM FEEL.

Taking a look at “tips for supervisors” helps teach us about tips for employee behavior. In the article *You've Been Promoted to Manager! Now Master the Job with These 5 Leadership Traits*<sup>3</sup> the author lists characteristics including trust, ownership, and openness. These can be used to enhance your relationship with your manager.

Curiosity, for instance, is “...leading with questions and remain[ing] open to other people's ideas.” Be curious about what is going on and what is important from the manager's view.

In “*How to Be a 'Favorite Boss'*” by Paul Falcone<sup>4</sup>, he writes that “...when people describe their favorite boss, they talk about who that person is, not necessarily what that person did. It's the [boss's] character, encouragement, and personal concern and involvement that makes them someone's favorite boss.”

The quest to be a *favorite employee* is not, again, written in a cynical light. It is simply that you are a good employee, who, like a good supervisor, does their level best, communicates well, is open to new ideas, respectfully asks questions, recognizes the humanness in others, and helps motivate – yes motivate – their supervisor. You help build self-esteem and confidence. Favorite employees challenge supervisors to grow, achieve, and produce. And you will be remembered for your character, as well as for your competence.

<sup>3</sup> [You've Been Promoted to Manager! Now Master the Job with These 5 Leadership Traits](#) by Brian O'Connell, March 23, 2021. Accessed May 10, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> [How to Be a 'Favorite Boss'](#) by Paul Falcone, May 22, 2020. Accessed May 10, 2021.

**Do you have a group of bosses? Training is the key to meet this challenge.**

Public libraries in Vermont are governed by elected or appointed trustees, five to 15 in number. The library director answers to this board of trustees. With more than one trustee, opportunity for glitches in management rears its [sometimes ugly] head. Among some commonly-faced challenges are under-cutting and multiple-boss-syndrome.

1. A trustee undercuts the director by working directly with an employee *or* volunteer.
  - Solution> Trustees must respect the authority of the library director in all matters of supervision.
2. An employee undercuts the director by working directly with a trustee.
  - Solution> repeat: trustees must respect the authority of the library director in all matters of supervision. Employees must understand that they may not do this; again supported by the trustees not accepting this behavior.
3. A director is contacted by two or more trustees about “what they think should be done” in a situation or work requests.
  - Solution> Trustees must identify **one** common point of supervision, usually the chair. *And* stick to it.

If you are having these or similar challenges, the ultimate answer is good training, including on-boarding of new trustees followed by refreshers. Working the other direction, employees should be *good* employees by bringing their questions directly to the director, not a trustee. Never skip your supervisor in the hierarchy unless your concern is of a *very* serious nature. In the *Trustee’s Manual*<sup>5</sup>, it reads:

“Only in cases of greatest malfeasance or neglect by the director, or in cases where the

library director has invited employees to be part of the discussion, should a trustee enter into discussion with a library employee on matters of library policy and procedure or library operation.”

- **Training for trustees and library staff is available** through the Vermont Department of Library’s [consultants](#) on issues of small and rural libraries and governance. They are very knowledgeable!
- An **essential read** is the [Trustee’s Manual](#). The manual offers guidance and clarity on personnel policy, job descriptions for staff, and regular performance evaluations.
- Library trustees have a plethora of resources to draw upon when it comes to library management. For example, The **Vermont Department of Libraries** has a wonderful resource collection found at the [Library Trustees and Friends Organizations](#) page.
- For additional reading in topics associated with HR, including templates for personnel policies, please visit my website at [UVM Extension](#) (the Vermont Public Libraries Educational Program).

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<sup>5</sup> Trustees Manual, Vermont Department of Libraries  
<https://libraries.vermont.gov/sites/libraries/files/PublicLibraries/Trustees/TrusteeManual6thEd2014.pdf>