

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Managing Your Boss ▶ 07/12/07

Keith is a division president whom I coached many years ago. Now he was calling me about Sondra, his new head of sales and marketing.

“Working with her is a roller coaster. Some days she seems fine then five minutes later she’s pouting or crying or angry. I really need her to level out and stop the drama.”

I laughed hearing this from Keith. When he and I had worked together, the goal for his coaching had been for him to warm up. His boss, the CEO, valued relationships highly. But Keith had succeeded because of his intellectual horsepower, not his interpersonal skills. During his coaching, Keith had made significant strides in the realm of relationships and feelings, but that territory was never going to be completely comfortable for him. Now he had to manage Sondra, who seemed to live in that world excessively. How ironic.

During my first session with Sondra, she went on at length about Keith. “He’s the coldest fish I’ve ever worked for. I know I’m expressive and passionate—that’s why I’m good at what I do!—but, I swear, the minute I get excited about something, he shuts down like there’s some bad smell in the room. I think he wants us all running around like little robots.”

I smiled inwardly. The conversation I was going to have with Sondra about Keith was almost the exact same conversation I’d had years before with Keith about *his* boss. Here’s the short version:

Your boss is your biggest customer. Period.

Early in his coaching, Keith had struggled to overcome his resistance to chat. Intellectually he understood that Chuck, his boss, prized unstructured chatting prior to diving into data. But whenever he got in the room, Keith’s natural style would take over and he’d launch into his numbers without preamble. “I am who I am,” he used to tell me helplessly.

“And Chuck is who *he* is,” I’d reply. “And he’s your boss. And he’s asking you to do something different.” I paused. “If this were a client you were courting, you’d make the change.”



“At least until we landed him,” he conceded sheepishly.

And that’s one of the core problems. We think because we have our jobs we can stop attending to our bosses’ needs. But if you have direct reports, you know that’s not true. You expect your direct reports to give you information the way you want it, don’t you? And when they don’t, it annoys you, doesn’t it? Isn’t it amazing that we expect one thing from the people reporting to us but don’t apply those same expectations to ourselves in relation to our bosses?

This issue of matching styles is only one of the ways you need to be adept at managing your boss. John Kotter and John Gabarro, in their Harvard Business Review article, “Managing Your Boss,” mention a broad range of things you need to know in order to manage your boss effectively. They write:

At a minimum, you need to appreciate your boss’s:

- ▶ Goals and pressures;
- ▶ Strengths and weaknesses, long suits and blind spots;
- ▶ Organizational and personal objectives;
- ▶ Pressures, especially those from his or her own boss and others at the same level;
- ▶ Preferred style of working;
- ▶ Preference for receiving information, e.g., memos, formal meetings, phone calls, etc.;
- ▶ Tolerance or avoidance of conflict.

Would *you* be able to address all those points about your boss? Most people can’t. And that list, say Kotter and Gabarro, is what you should know “at a minimum”!

“Without this information,” they continue, “a manager is flying blind when dealing with the boss, and unnecessary conflicts, misunderstandings, and problems are inevitable.” Inevitable? Ouch!

That article caused quite a stir when it was originally published in 1993. The topic remains so important, the article was updated and republished in 2005. Over the years so many reprints have been requested that the Harvard Business Review has named it one of their Classics. It’s an important read. To order an electronic download of it for a nominal fee [click here](#).

Keith and Sondra both worked to address the points in Kotter and Gabarro’s article. They also worked hard to manage themselves—perhaps the toughest task facing every leader. Over time, their adapted styles became more natural and they found they had expanded their style repertoire. That



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expansion of *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™ made them more effective senior leaders—and it certainly helped them manage their bosses better. Follow their lead.

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