



Leading Up: The Art of Managing Your Boss

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True or false: Leaders have followers, but not all followers are subordinates.

Quite true, says management professor [Michael Useem](#), director of Wharton's Center for Leadership and Change Management. Indeed, if managers wish to be effective, they must learn how to lead the people they report to as well as the employees they oversee. Useem calls this process "leading up."

Leaders have always been required to lead both up and down, but it is more important to lead up today than in years past. As organizations decentralize, managers must recognize that to accomplish their goals they must exert greater influence on superiors.

"Leading up is the act of working with people above you - whether one boss, several bosses, a chief executive, a board of directors or even stockholders - to help them and you get a better job done," says Useem, whose book, *Leading Up: How To Lead Your Boss So You Both Win*, is to be published in October by Random House. "Organizations need more overall direction from below to think strategically, communicate persuasively and act decisively."

Virtually any organization can benefit from more upward leadership, Useem says. Everyone knows an executive, director, political leader or religious figure who could have been more effective had they only been given direction or assistance by the people for whom they were responsible.

Useem notes that leading up is not the same as managing up, just as managing down differs from leading down. "When you manage down, you hire good people, work out an appropriate compensation system for them, review their performance and meet deadlines," Useem explains. "Leading down involves more than that. You have to add value to an office, not just run it. You have to go well beyond where you are now. You have to excite people, mobilize the troops. Often that also entails large-scale changes in the architecture of an organization."

In the same way, he says, leading up is more difficult than just managing up. Keeping your boss informed about what you are hearing from your sales people in the field about customer needs is an example of managing up. Leading up, by contrast, might involve offering your superior a strategic insight or plan that could open up a new market for the company. Or, if your boss is falling short in conveying his or her vision for the firm, leading up would require that you coach your boss to help him or her find more effective ways for getting the message out.

Nor does leading up mean trying to ingratiate yourself with your superiors, being a nagging fault-finder who criticizes people or undermining someone's authority. Instead, Useem says, leading up is an "affirmative calling" to help a boss accomplish what everyone and the organization wants or needs to accomplished. The premise is that superiors need all the leadership assistance they can get.

Useem says almost anyone in an organization can lead up if the organization encourages it. "If you're a middle or top person at Motorola, Hewlett-Packard or Deutsche Bank, you should want all the help you can get from the ranks below. The markets these companies face are far too complex for any one person to see it all. But it's also critical that companies create a culture that helps people understand that you do want upward feedback, that you want coaching and assistance in being effective, that you want all the strategic insights on your markets that people below can provide."

If not done properly, however, leading up can be risky, especially if your superiors are not ready for it. "You always have to undertake it carefully," Useem says. "But some bosses won't tolerate any upward leadership, and with them you may not want to risk ending your career at the company in trying to



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provide it."

A recent example of leading up took place aboard the U.S. surveillance plane that was forced to land after it was struck and damaged by a Chinese fighter jet. The commander of the U.S. aircraft relied heavily on information relayed to him by his crew as he made split-second decisions amidst terrible chaos about whether to abandon the plane or try to land it safely, and how to go about destroying sensitive intelligence information on board.

"The crew members did what they knew they had to do on behalf of their mission and commander," says Useem. "The flight engineer later said, 'Thank God for our training.' That was a very telling comment. The commander carried total authority on that aircraft, but he had people on board who were well-trained in the art of taking charge and of carrying out their responsibilities and collectively acting as if they were all in command."

The U.S. Marine Corps, where rank is also highly delineated and prized, has embraced the concept of leading up as well. When Marine officers plan a military action, they ask subordinates to speak up about what they think may be fatal flaws in the plan. "If you do that repeatedly, your subordinates come to appreciate that you really do want their insights, and they will become believers," Useem says. "Also remember that in asking for upward feedback, just because you did not first appreciate certain ideas yourself in no way undermines your rank or threatens your stature in the minds of subordinates."

In his forthcoming book, Useem recounts the case of two high-level civil servants - Charlene Barshefsky, the former U.S. trade representative, and Domingo Cavallo, Argentina's economy minister in the early 1990s - who were required to lead up in order to accomplish their goals.

Barshefsky was pivotal in negotiating China's entry into the World Trade Organization on behalf of her boss, President Clinton, a Democrat whose party included a wing that had long opposed the free-trade policies that Barshefsky was advocating.

For his part, Cavallo was asked by Argentina's president, Carlos Menem, to stabilize the nation's currency at a time when inflation was increasing at such a frightening rate that beverage dispensers and pay phones were not operating because the value of coins could decline in a matter of days, even hours. Cavallo agreed. But to do his job he said he would have to link the peso with the U.S. dollar - a strategy that ran contrary to the tenets of Menem's own party, which was founded by Juan Peron and favored state protection of the economy. (Coincidentally, Cavallo was recently named economy minister again and given the task of rejuvenating Argentina's economy once more.)

"What Barshefsky and Cavallo had to do was sell their concepts to their respective presidents," says Useem. "Cavallo and Barshefsky succeeded, and their actions forever transformed Argentina and altered the relationship between the U.S and China. In each case they took risks, pushed hard and drew critics, but they never lost sight of what they had to do, and they did it."

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