

The Most Dangerous Game *Avoiding entanglements when managing up*

The term "going over the boss's head" is usually used to describe the process of bypassing a supervisor who an employee perceives as incompetent or ineffective. It's sneaky business that requires amazing political skills that would impress Cardinal Richelieu and the awareness that an unsuccessful attempt to take down a boss could be career suicide. In the modern matrix organization, however, it is common for workers to bypass their direct supervisors and interact directly with the top brass. But even if your goal isn't to topple your boss, failure to keep him or her informed may be perceived as underhanded and could create unnecessary friction in the workplace.

For most of human history, the boss/employee relationship was pretty simple: the manager (who in many cases was also the owner of the business) would tell an underling to do something and he or she would do it. Willfully ignoring a directive was grounds for dismissal — or worse. Then came the industrial revolution of the 19th century, which fostered the growth of large companies with multiple layers of management. For the first time, civilian workers found themselves reporting to a hired gun rather than to the head honcho, creating a pyramid in which managers reported up the food chain to an increasingly smaller number of decision makers.

As a result of this structure, employees today often look up the food chain not only at their own supervisors, but at their boss's bosses. In theory, information should flow up and down the corporate ladder in an orderly way, but the reality is far more convoluted. Adding to this complexity are team-based approaches that allow interactions between lower-level employees and senior management without an intermediary, but while this "filterless" approach may be good for productivity and efficiency it can also create situations where employees bypass their direct supervisors to receive direction or report information. As a result, managers may feel that their direct reports are trying to undermine their authority.

There's plenty of advice out there for people who actually do want to kick their bosses to the curb. If you're looking to get rid of a manager, Badbossology.com has plenty of information on how to deal with supervisors who bully, discriminate, harass, underpay, invade workers' privacy or are simply not fit to do their jobs. While the mechanics of making this a reality may be challenging, the dynamic is actually quite simple because it's a relationship in which two adversaries duke it out. In contrast, working in an environment where a good boss is being cut out of the loop can actually create a much more difficult situation.

Just because you may work in a company with a flat structure where working directly with multiple levels of management is the norm, that's no excuse to ignore the chain of command. "I think it's extremely dangerous," says Bill **Torchiana**, founder of **Torchiana**, Mastrov & Sapiro, the largest independently owned career-management consulting firm in Northern California. "You're supposed to have a good relationship with your boss, which really comes from trust. If you don't have trust, you're doomed."

He points out that one of the major differences between working as a team player and improperly bypassing one's boss is intent. "I don't care where you're working; you serve at the pleasure of your boss. No matter how flat the organization is, there are certain protocols that people need to follow to keep their managers in the loop. What is not proper is for employees to promote themselves at the expense of their bosses. If you're doing that, it's pretty clear to me that you are working for your own betterment, not the betterment of the company."

Another complicating factor is that many workers have multiple managers, and many of those individuals may not even be based in the same city — or country. The traditional pyramid-shaped organizational chart still exists, but dotted lines and other variations reflect the reality that fluid hierarchies have become the norm. As a result, workers may report to a day-to-day manager in the same building and also a group leader in another part of the world. So how can employees stay on the right side of their managers when they are working in an amorphous structure? There is no single answer, but **Torchiana** has a simple piece of advice: "Ask your boss." Find out if your manager needs to be copied on all e-mails that you send — even if he or she is not involved in the project — or if there is enough of a comfort level that a periodic check-in meeting or activity report will be sufficient. "You need to work this out for a few reasons, but one of the most important is that it builds a level of trust between you and your boss."

In addition to intent, a major factor in successfully managing up is personality, explains Dr. Rich Wellins, senior vice president of Development Dimensions International, a Pittsburgh-based human resources consulting firm. "It really depends on the kind of boss you have. There are some managers in a matrix organization who are confident and secure, and they tend to encourage people to work with several other managers because they are focused on what it takes to get a job done," says Wellins. "On the other side are bosses who probably shouldn't be in a matrix organization because they get territorial and resentful when their direct reports work with others outside of the formal chain of command. As an employee, it's important to try to keep them happy because having a bad relationship with a manager can really turn into an issue of job security."

Like **Torchiana**, he points out that managers have different comfort levels when it comes to getting information from their subordinates. "Some bosses feel a need to control, but others just want to be in the loop. Employees need to figure out what kind of boss they have so they can interact with them in a way that is going to build trust."

Wellins also says that employees need to realize that they have to manage multiple internal customers — and keep them happy. "They're juggling three or four balls, not just one, so they need to be aware of how multiple managers want to interact. The best way to do this is to ask questions so they can set limits, manage expectations and determine how to succeed."