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How You Can Help Your Manager Succeed

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Recently, I asked my LinkedIn connections to share their best advice on how to fail as a manager. Here are some suggestions:

- *Don't tell your employees what their annual raise is; by all means, let them wait to check their bank statement and figure it out manually.*
- *Have a computer between the two of you, and read email while "listening."*
- *Have as many typos in an email as possible.*

So I guess it's not too hard to find examples of bad managers. But based on my experience, it's even easier to find examples of "just OK" managers. The "just OK" manager is the one who isn't soul-sucking or Dilbert-worthy, but she isn't mourned when the next reorganization moves you to another leader, either.

There's Hope for the "Just OK" Manager. It's You.

The surprising, often overlooked fact about the "just OK" manager is that there's hope. And that hope is you, the person they are tasked to manage. Here are a few ways how.

1. Replace your frustration with empathy.

Annoyed at slow or inadequate responses to your requests? Irritated at the lack of attention to your work, progress or career plan? Don't let it eat at you. **Try replacing your frustration with empathy.**

Empathy happens when we take a second to recognize and understand the feelings and experiences of someone else. It happens when, instead of making an assumption, we ask "what else might be going on here?"

For example, instead of concluding that your manager's persistent habit of canceling your one-on-one meetings means he hates you/thinks you're undeserving of his time/is an insensitive pig, you might instead notice that he's overwhelmed/struggling with his projects/dropped his BlackBerry in the toilet. Instead of "Grrrr," you might think "Mmmmm."

That doesn't mean you tolerate behavior that doesn't meet your needs. It just means you can change the way you feel about it so it doesn't eat you inside. After all, all you can control is what you think, what you do, and what you say.

Speaking of say ...

2. Take control.

The easiest way to help your manager succeed is to give her the road map. Tell her what you need, clearly and specifically. Take control to move those needs forward. Don't wait to see how she wants to drive this relationship. Give her the keys.

That means **putting the right words in your mouth about the things that are most important to you.** For example, you may need to say things like:

- "I work best if we can connect live for 30 minutes a minimum of once a month. I know you're busy, so I'll set up these meetings for the next six months and plan to send you the three



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bullet points I'd like to cover in advance of each conversation. What else would you need from me to make this time work best for you?"

- "Sometime in the next two months, I'd like to have a detailed conversation about my future in our company and talk more about how I can grow to the next level. If we meet in 60 days, what would you like me to provide you ahead of time to prepare? Is there anyone else who should be involved in this conversation?"
- "I'm noticing we keep having XYZ issue on the team and it doesn't seem to get resolved. I know you're busy, so unless I hear differently from you, my plan will be to handle it by doing A, B and C."

If we don't step forward and tell people—including those in positions of authority—exactly what we need to be successful, how can they be successful? Sure, saying some of these things may make some managers stop and say, "Whoa! Let's handle that a different way!" But that's great—at least the conversation is moving forward, instead of lurking in the background of discontent.

3. Don't assume what success looks like.

So you're using your empathetic heart. You're applying your courage and taking control, asking for what you need. The last item you need is something you have with you always—your brain.

Think from your manager's point of view, not yours. What is he measured on? What does he care about? Where does he spend his time—and what does he seem to enjoy most? What does success truly look like for him? It's worth investing some gray matter on this question.

Maybe you think he should be measured on how engaged or productive you are—but maybe his bosses aren't focused on that. Maybe he measures success in taking on the big mega-projects—the projects that need a star, not people who are building other people.

Assess the facts as you know them and make some preliminary conclusions. Then, test them with the source:

- "Based on what I know about our performance

measures, I'd observe that success for you is measured by X, Y and Z. Is this correct, or are there other factors you're paying attention to?"

- "I've been thinking a lot about my own success measures, and didn't want to make assumptions about how you measure yours. So tell me—how do you measure your success in your role? What are the most important things for you to achieve?"

While this is a natural conversation to have at performance planning or annual review time, it's always appropriate in our ever-changing business world to calibrate and re-calibrate what success looks like. Sometimes managers won't realize that their priorities have changed, but will shift their behavior based on the prevailing winds—and never notice.

You've got the superpowers. Now help your manager win, and you'll win too. ●