

By Calvin Sun

*I'm gettin' paid by the hour, and older by the minute
My boss just pushed me over the limit
I'd like to call him somethin'
I think I'll just call it a day...*

—Alan Jackson, Jimmy Buffett, "It's Five O'clock Somewhere"

Bosses: You can't live with them, and you can't live without them. Like it or not, most of us must deal with a boss, and the way we do so affects not just our career advancement and our salary, but also our mental well-being. Here are some tips on how to get along better with your boss.

1 Remember that your boss just might have useful insights

Think you have a clueless boss? Remember the words of Mark Twain, who once said that when he was 14, his father was so stupid it was unbearable. Then, he continued, when he became 21, he was amazed at how much his father had learned in just seven years. Your boss might be smarter than you think, and maybe later in your career, you will appreciate that fact. Regardless, a bad boss can still offer good advice. I remember what a boss from years ago told me about the workplace. He said I should be aggressive and find out what people needed done rather than sit back and wait for assignments.

Think of it this way: You still can learn from a bad boss. Analyze why that boss is a bad boss and then resolve to avoid those things if you ever become a boss yourself. As the cynic reminds us, even a stopped clock is correct twice a day.

2 Know your boss' objectives

Software developers often concern themselves with "traceability." The requirements for a software system must directly or indirectly be tied, or traced, to the objectives of the company. In theory, therefore, any requirement that lacks such traceability should be considered irrelevant and removed.

In the same way, try to see the bigger picture. You need to know what the boss expects of you (see the next tip). But at the same time, you need to understand how your job helps the boss. Make sure that what you're doing not only meets your own job description but helps the boss achieve his or her own objectives.

3 Know what your boss expects of you

When I was young, I once complained to my mother that I had nothing to do. "Calvin," she answered, "Why don't you practice piano?" That was the last time I ever complained to her about that topic.

Ignorance of your parents' wishes may be fine when you're a child, but ignorance (willful or otherwise) of your boss's expectations can kill your career. How can you expect a good performance evaluation if you're unaware of how you're going to be measured? If you know your objectives, are they quantifiable? If so, both of you will have an easier time during your evaluation. Every once in a while, check with your boss about what you're doing and what you've accomplished and make sure your boss has that same understanding. If your boss has issues with your performance, it's better for both of you that you know sooner rather than later, so you have time to make adjustments.

In a perfect world, no surprises should arise during your performance review. If they do, either your boss didn't communicate the objectives or you failed to understand them. Don't let that happen to you.

4 Be low maintenance

Don't be the "problem employee," the one the boss always has to check up and follow up on. Instead, try to be the one the boss can depend on. It might not be apparent immediately, but a good boss will recognize and appreciate that trait.

Are you going to be perfect in your work? Of course not. You're probably going to make a mistake or create a problem at least once. However, when that happens, and you go to your boss (as you should, as mentioned below), try to go not just with the report of the problem. Think of some solutions and be prepared to offer your recommendations to your boss.

5 Don't surprise the boss

Don't let your boss be blindsided by bad news. In other words, "fee up" if you created a problem or made a mistake. It's better that bad news about you should come from you—not from a customer, not from a co-worker, and absolutely not from your boss's boss. Did you have a negative interaction with an abusive caller or customer? As soon as the call is finished, call your boss and give a briefing. Tell the boss who you spoke with, why that person is upset, and what the boss can expect to hear from that person. Also give your side of the story.

The same advice applies to good news as well. Let your boss know about your successes. Otherwise, your boss might give the impression of being unaware of them when his or her own boss offers congratulations.

6 Acknowledge your boss in your successes

The moment has arrived: You're in front of your group, receiving an award or other recognition from your boss or your boss' boss. An appropriate thing to do at this point is to recognize the people who made it possible, in particular your boss. It's easy to do if your boss really did help you. What about the "difficult" boss, though? You should try to say something, but at the same time you probably should be truthful as well.

Remember what we discussed above—that even a bad boss can provide good insights and examples. Did your boss discourage you or make things difficult? Maybe, in that case, you could thank your boss for helping you "keep things in perspective" or for "serving as a sanity check" or for helping you "see the problem from multiple points of view." Don't push things, or you may start sounding cute and insincere. However, do try to say *something* about your boss' help.

7 Don't take criticism personally

Because most of us are so involved with our work, it's hard to separate ourselves from it. So when someone criticizes our work, we view that criticism as a personal attack. Reacting that way can hinder our development and our progress. The next time your boss (or anyone else) criticizes your work, try pretending that the work was done by someone else. Then, examine it as a third party would and test the validity of the criticism.

A smart boss realizes that your success is tied to his or her own success. Therefore, the boss has an interest in your doing well. Furthermore, criticism from the boss could be a sign that the boss has high expectations from you. When I first began working, I was upset because my boss had given me a task that I thought was too hard. I discussed my concern with a friend of my father, who worked in the same area as I did. Though it happened years ago, I still remember that friend's advice. "Calvin," he said, "[name of boss] gave you that task because he thinks you can do a good job."

8 Remember your boss has a boss

We discussed earlier the importance of knowing your boss' objectives. In the same vein, be aware that your boss has a boss as well. You can use that fact to build a collaborative relationship with your own boss, because both of you have a common objective of making the boss' boss happy and making your boss look good. Having that collaborative relationship gives your boss a better impression of you and gives you visibility to your boss' boss.

9 Don't upstage your boss

Upstaging your boss can limit your career mobility. Therefore, be careful of correcting your boss in public, as someone did to my father once. While he was making a group presentation, he referred to Worcester Polytechnic Institute. In doing so, he correctly pronounced it as "Woo-ster." This person spoke up, saying, "Wellington, you're wrong. It's 'Woo-ches-ter.'" Fortunately, my father was smart, deflecting the comment with the following answer: "I'm sorry. Please forgive me. English is only my fifth language." My father humorously defused the situation. However, the fact that after all these years I still hear this story tells you what my father thought of that correction and the person who made it.

There's one instance when it's okay to correct your boss in public: when your boss mistakenly thinks he or she made a mistake but really didn't. Suppose your boss quotes a figure while giving a presentation. He or she then stops and says, "I'm sorry, I think I made a mistake." If you know the boss was originally correct, it's fine at that point to interrupt and say, "No, [boss' name], you're correct."

10 Manage your boss when necessary

Getting ahead in your career requires more than just sitting back and waiting for assignments. You must take initiative, looking for opportunities and problems to be solved. In doing so, take advantage of any organizational power your boss might have. Explain to your boss your plans and why they represent a good business decision. Then, ask your boss to fight any bureaucratic battles that may arise and to run interference for you. In doing so, you recognize the boss is the boss. However, you are directing your boss, in taking advantage of pull that you possibly lack.



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