Managing Up

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I like my boss, but they often micro-manage me and my projects. How can I work more effectively with them, so I don’t feel that someone is constantly looking over my shoulder?

Maribel: Leading someone you report to, or managing up, can be necessary whether you have a great or terrible relationship with your manager. To be clear, managing up is not about manipulating your boss. It’s about determining how to work with someone to whom you report in a way that will produce the best possible results for your organization. It is about making it easy for your boss to be your boss.

Try to establish communication systems early on for checking in and getting questions answered. Agree on how and when to update your manager on your work. You might have a manager who is a phone person, while you are not. You might have a manager who likes to be updated way more frequently than you prefer to update. Rather than labeling them a micro-manager (or risking them labeling you a slacker), have a conversation in which you establish the rules of engagement directly with your manager, and then follow them.

It also helps to pay attention and to be a bit of a mind reader. The better you anticipate your boss’s needs and demonstrate your understanding of them, the more confidence and influence you will build with your manager.

Make it easy for your manager to give input. If you have a problem, try to give a proposal or suggested solution rather than an open-ended “What should I do about …?,” which puts the onus back on your boss. If you give options and allow your manager to give you a quick yes or no answer, you make it easier on both of you, and you also have quietly demonstrated that you are an independent, critical thinker and a capable employee.
Many, try not to take things personally and don’t overstep. Sometimes you will have a different point of view on something where your manager is the ultimate decision maker. When that happens, advocate for what you believe, but have a thick skin and check your ego at the door.

Remember that your manager is human. Realize that in the same way you might have sensitivities about your relationship, they might have them as well, and be thoughtful of how you approach your relationship with them.

Scott: It’s worth keeping in mind that there is a perfectly healthy version of active, detail-oriented supervision that amounts to plain old “management.” It’s unreasonable to chafe at your supervisor checking in on the status of a project or wanting to discuss your methodology. Your performance ultimately reflects on your supervisor, and they are often responsible for reporting to their own superiors on projects being worked on by those they supervise. When management turns into micromanagement, however, productivity and morale can start to slip.

So, what can you do when a supervisor’s management style crosses the threshold from collaborative and constructive to overbearing and counterproductive? This is where we get into the concept of managing up. This will involve communicating with your supervisor that you would benefit from a different style of management. How you communicate that message is up to you. Like so much that we talk about here, this boils down to developing interpersonal and business intelligence to create scenarios where you feel best able to do your job in a happy and productive manner.

The direct, but gentle, approach. For those who are most comfortable with a direct approach, consider gently addressing the issue by asking whether there are any issues with your work product. Ask if your performance has been satisfactory, or if there are improvements that you can make in your methodology or end results. If your performance is indeed satisfactory, let your supervisor know that the degree of scrutiny that you believe you’ve been placed under makes you feel like you are doing something wrong. In most cases, this approach will result in less micromanaging, as your supervisor sees how their approach is being received.

The behaviorist approach. If you prefer a more behaviorist approach, consider gently showing your supervisor that it is safe to give you a longer leash. As I mentioned above, you are going to have to report to your supervisor—it’s just part of the job. Instead of forcing your supervisor to be the one initiating those check-in sessions (and determining the nature of those interactions), consider being proactive about updates. If you are the one initiating these conversations, you can likely change the nature and tone into something you’re more comfortable with. Check in at reasonable intervals, make sure deadlines are being met, and request feedback on completed assignments.

Most supervisors just want to know that your work is being completed at a high level, and that they can speak intelligently about it if pressed. Show that you can check those boxes without additional prodding and there should be no need for micromanagement!

Dolly: Maribel and Scott have laid out a number of great ways to work with any boss—not just a micromanager. For those who like to run free, it can be difficult to be “managed” at all. The key is to build a relationship with clear communication and find a way to work within your boss’s needs and expectations. Are they micromanaging because of a lack of trust, or because they need to have information in order to manage their own bosses? As Bob Dylan once noted, we all “have to serve somebody.”

I once had a boss who was an absolute pro at managing up, but conversely was not great at managing their employees. When I understood that I was working with someone who needed to be able to show their bosses how well they were performing—even when they weren’t—it became a lot easier to anticipate the needs of my boss, and to do the type of work they were looking for. Until that point, however, I had been deeply frustrated, wishing for more engagement and leadership. Ultimately, that was not something this boss could give me—they priorities were elsewhere.

From this example, I learned a lot about how to manage up effectively, but I learned even more about how to communicate with my own direct reports. Had my boss been clear from the outset about their needs, we might not have struggled as hard as we did. Once I understood what they needed, we made a successful team until I was able to find a better role elsewhere. And this, I think, is the most vital management lesson of all: sometimes the best way to manage your boss is not to have them as a boss anymore.