Upward Management from Programming Understanding or Perspective

Shechang Li, China R&D and Medical Affairs Janssen Research & Development

ABSTRACT

As a programmer, it's not easy to find a solution to make the boss-employee relationship as simple as a typic technical problem: program with bug and the master of debugger. Admittedly, managing up is not as easy as coding or debugging, but there are still some general practices you can follow. The article tries to define notion of upward management by setting up the goal and listing 4 key facts of upward management: critical stakeholder, power difference, predisposition toward dependence and mutual dependence. It also suggests a 2 steps method to develop thorough understanding of your boss and accommodating your boss's work style. In conclusion, the best pathway to a healthy relationship begins and ends with doing your job, and doing it well.

INTRODUCTION

Effective interpersonal communication has long been recognized as basic to any successful enterprise and career development. In fact, the problem of communicating has become the number one rejection factor of our reviewing for statistical programmer recruitment recently. Within all the stakeholders to communicate, your boss seams the most important and difficult one to handle. In programming world, the interaction with code and data is simple and straightforward. However, in workplace jungle, the boss is more complicated and harder to placate. It's not easy to find a treatment of boss-employee relations that dose characterize the boss as a program with bug and the subordinate as a master of debugger. Some guys may suggest that "having trouble communicating with boss, the very least I can do is shut up and focus on coding."

Ignoring that good advice, since progress won't come from evading. It ignores a serious management issue-the need to "manage up." In traditional belief, managing up was considered inappropriate. People paid attention to their relationship with subordinates and peers, managing upward didn't make sense unless you were trying to suck up. However, upward management try to define a pattern of interaction between you and your boss, builds a healthy boss-subordinate relationship that increase effectiveness of communication and then delivers the best possible results for your organization (and by extension, for each of you).

WHY MANAGING UP MATTERS

Thinking of a situation that you need to persuade your boss to accept a proposal of new tool development which need a lot of investment but can grapple with the challenges and opportunities facing the organization. How can you help your boss develop a sense of urgency, to craft a vision, to communicate the vision and to invest to your proposal? Appropriate upward management and accommodations you make help you gain better insight into your boss's context: his strengths and weaknesses, the challenge he meets, and the combination of organizational and personal objectives he's trying to meet. And based on that understanding, it will be easy for you to enable the people involved to move on to the true business at hand.

Differentiate from management in traditional understanding, there are a few critical facts that have huge impact on our strategy and action.

CRITIAL STAKEHOLDER

Relationship with study response physician, statistician and vendors are crucial to your business success. It will ensure the efficiency of delivering of your clinical trial analysis. You need the support from cross function team members to achieve your goals and have to invest in maintenance of the relationships with them. Meanwhile your relationship with your boss is simply another critical relationship, why not invest in it?

POWER DIFFERENCE

What makes the boss-subordinate relationship a special case, is the power differential. Your boss has huge impact on the opportunity and resource you need to excel. When your actions and proposal are constrained by your boss's decision, it will result in certain degree of frustration and trigger a challenge situation which may lead to derail behaviors like highly reactive.

COUNTERDEPENDENT VS DEPENDENT

Considering the power difference, knowing our attitude toward authority may reveal the inclination how you tend to behave in relation to your boss. Are you a counter dependent programmer who resent the boss's authority, or a dependent person who will swallow your anger and be amenable to the decision the boss makes what they know to be a poor one?

MUTUAL DEPENDENCE

The above facts are important, but not more than the fact that you and your boss are mutual dependence. Your boss needs your cooperation, dependability and honesty in order to do his own job and achieve the organization goal and his personal goal. The more you understand the goals, constraints and pressure of your boss, the better you will be able to help him succeed. In return, he will be more likely to provide more opportunity, ensure your priorities are aligned with organization's goal and ensure the resource you need to excel.

DEVELOP THOROUGH UNDERSTANDING OF YOUR BOSS

How do you develop that thorough understanding of your boss's situation and accommodate his working style? There are two steps you may follow.

BEGIN WITH GOALS AND EXPECTATION DISCUSSION

Top 5 Responsibilities

As a programmer, when you try a new function, the first thing maybe reading the manual of this function to get clear understanding of function input and outcome. A clear understanding of the expected input will help you handle the function correctly. However, in working place, people trend not be aware of their boss's needs. If you treat your boss as a function, you don't know what input he expected, how can you expect a correct outcome? Everyone should clarify the top five responsibilities with their boss so that both understand and agree on what those priorities are.

Spell out Expectation as Explicitly and with All Detail You'd Like

However, few bosses spell out their expectation as explicitly and with all the detail that you'd like. In the early stage of my managing career, I used to request my direct reports to provide a list of stakeholders for year-end performance feedback, which is a vague request. Some of them provided a list of names and when I typed them into the system, there were multiple colleagues with duplicate name came up. The other ones thought it is a vague request and clarified the specific information needed and then provided a list with the name, email, the projects in which they worked together and key goals and objectives to which the stakeholder can provide feedback. That saved a lot of effort of the manager.

I've shared this story with a lot of people. Some people think that it is a typical vague request from the boss, and others have used this way to test team members in their work.

The lessons here: Don't take information at face value. Don't make assumptions about areas in which you lack information. Regularly seek clarification and updates about your boss's objectives – concerns and priorities have a way of changing over time.

Organization Goals vs. Personal Objectives

In addition, don't only focus on the organizational goals or your personal goals. Your boss's personal objective can have just as much effect on how satisfied he is with your performance. In a modern matrix organization, your boss also feels the pressures from above and from his peers. In his goals and

objectives, there are also some challenge items that he needs to meet. In past few years, I always listed "engages in open and honest conversations" in my leadership objectives. So, a conversation with me to address difficult issues, raise concern about the workload, development opportunity and un-appropriate management behaviors or even criticism will demonstrate that I cultivated an environment where others feel safe to engage in open, honest conversation. The people who did that not only bought her credibility as an employee with ownership of the organization, but greater trust and respect that resulted in getting more development opportunity that were important to her.

KNOW YOUR BOSS'S WORK STYLE AND ACCOMODATE IT

After you get a clear understanding about your boss's goal and objectives, you will score more points with your boss by accommodating your work style to him. That you need to observe your boss, paying special attention to his preference about such things as meetings and modes of communication which provides many clues about how best to interact with him.

You can use the following common items to categorize your boss's working style and take action to accommodate it.

- Formal & Organized

  One of the leaders I worked with usually deliver the meeting agenda in table a few days before the meeting. This clue me that she prefers a formal and organized working style. So, do ensure to deliver message in formatted tabulation which will be easier for her to understand.

  For other boss who prefer visualization style, a flow chart will be better than detail description.

- Focus on critical information

  A few years ago, I always try to provide as much background information as possible to my boss in working report, not noticing that he became impatient and inattentive when I described the details. Till one day, my boss gave me feedback that why not starting from the age of dinosaurs when I deliver the reports, I did realize that I need to keep digression and background detail to a minimum, and focus on the critical information, request, or status update.

- Process Information Method

  Did he prefer to set up a meeting to discuss the topics with you or request you to provide a report? If he likes to study it by himself, give it to him in a written form. If he likes to listen and ask questions, a presentation with Questions &Answer will be better way to accommodate.

- Decision-Making Style

  There are two typic decision-making styles: for high-involvement manager, regularly touch base and ongoing communication ensure he got involved in the conduction of the projects; for delegation model manager, just keep him updated with important changes and major problems but handle the other details by yourself.

  However, as I mentioned above that the objectives of your boss may change over time, sometimes, your boss may reflect on the decision he made with you but hasn't keep you update to date on his last thinking. This will lead to certain degree of frustration when you were asked to provide more information to help make decision while, in your mind, the decision had been made. You should take the initiative to ensure that you are in constant contact with such a boss, frequently asking him to express his objectives, comment on your proposals and ideas, and let you know if there's anything else he needs from you to proceed. The most important thing is to document these conversations with follow-up notes; these will help to correct any misunderstandings.

- Handle Conflict

  Some bosses tend to eliminate or minimize conflict and are not inclined to put the conflict on the table. This is respectful since it does harmonize the working environment. However, it does not mean that you just tell him only the happy news or evade any issues. He needs to know about failures and important problems, but it may be best to let him know in private.

For the other guys, they seem to enjoy conflict. Then you need be prepared for lively exchange with them. And if the discussion become excited or heated, it not necessarily a sign that they are angry with you. They just believe heated argument leads to comprehensive discussion.

PAY ATTENTION TO THE VALUE BEHIND THE BEHAVIOR

Obviously, you will benefit from accommodating your work style to your boss. But if impressing the boss has become your primary goal, you are losing yourself. However, in my understanding, the primary goal of accommodating work style is not impressing but supporting the value behind the behavior. The boss's preference often offers clues about his values. One of the portfolios leads I worked with always request the team to ensure everything are ready 2 days before the planed date. The boss's preference for an in-advance delivering was more than an annoying habit, it was a symbol of her dedication. Failing to notice that preference, always requesting to deliver on exact date was inadvertently sending the message that you didn't support one of your boss's strongly held value.

On the other hand, the manager should keep personal value aligned with organization value. That will ensure that your subordinates are interactive with the real you and build trust. In an organization that advocates quality first, it is difficult for a leader who takes quality issues lightly to win the trust of the organization. Remember, it is almost impossible to hide or camouflage one's values.

CONCLUSION

In the process of accommodating your boss's working style and support his value, goals, and objectives, you don't have to deny your own goals. Because upward management is constant work and conducted daily for the effective delivering of our business. Eventually, you need to gain your own credibility with your boss, who needs to be able to rely on you for a successful delivering of your projects. The best path to a healthy relationship begins and ends with doing your job and doing it well.

Developing a fully understanding of your boss's goals and objectives help you figure out how to be a genuine source of help. All the accommodation you make will make your communication with your boss smoother and more efficient. And once you and your boss have established a trusting relationship, the time you have to spend managing your boss should decrease dramatically.

Learning to adapt to the boss's preferred way of doing things helps you maintain control of your career. Once you have that skill, you need never feel apprehensive about working for anyone.

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CONTACT INFORMATION

Your comments and questions are valued and encouraged. Contact the author at:

Shechang Li
China R&D and Medical Affairs Janssen Research & Development
sli126@its.jnj.com