



Why Should the Boss Listen to You?

Secrets of gaining management's trust

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Question: I accepted my current position at the beginning of this year. With two dozen years in management (law enforcement/security), I have never seen a company with a greater need for security. The company has been without a security leader for more than two years. To be very blunt, they do not trust security professionals. Where do I start?

Answer: Your perception is likely right on target. Trust matters. The most crucial ingredient for building or rebuilding trust is learning to view the world more from management's perspective than from that of the staff function you represent. In fact, this ability of empathy is a prerequisite for establishing a sound relationship.

At the back of the boss' mind are wonderings about consultants, counselors and staff. Does this person really know what I do here every day, as they offer advice and counsel? Do they even care about what I want to accomplish?

Being listened to and having impact require that you gain the confidence of top leadership, understand and speak their lan-

guage, avoid the typical staff shortcomings that annoy bosses, respect the boss' time, develop the discipline to present your ideas with brief powerful presentations, give useful feedback and reduce the number of management surprises.

During my discussions with chief executives and leaders, specifically about advice they get both internally and externally, a pattern of frustration-inducing behaviors emerges relatively quickly. Avoid these behaviors:

- Suggesting more ideas and concepts than can possibly be achieved or even considered. Has the boss finished last week's priorities yet?
- Engaging in time-wasting and nonspecific (purposeless) conversations. Talk about what matters from their perspective.
- Offering information that is late or incomplete, with some key facts and data or interpretations apparently being purposely withheld.
- Reinforcing information that is already known or could be gathered independently. State the obvious if others are ignoring it.
- Giving only partial input, apparently on the assumption that the boss knows more, or should know more than he or she does.
- Being less than candid.
- Failing to end meetings on time. It is better to have several smaller meetings that all end on time, regardless of when they began, rather than one or two large meetings that put everyone, including operations people, behind schedule and that accomplish less or nothing.

The problem with all these behaviors is that they distract and irritate top executives and erect barriers to their taking your advice or taking you seriously.

Establishing relationships with management is doubly hard when a vacuum in staff leadership has existed for some time. When beginning a new senior staff position, initial discussions and orientations—especially from the existing staff perspective—quickly shift from security problems and other crucial issues to criticism of leaders. Staffers begin assigning blame for the current situation, speculating about the sources and causes of the existing challenges, offering miscellaneous indictments of style, complaining of failure to adapt or adopt preventive or preemptive measures and generally negatively assessing leadership from the staff perspective.

Whenever I hear these complaints, my thoughts are, "If I were your boss hearing this discussion, I would fire you on the spot." Why? This kind of thinking is fundamentally at odds with how the CEO thinks and what he or she expects. Rather than cataloging the leader's faults, deficiencies and other problematic characteristics, try to develop methods, techniques and processes that constructively and promptly address weaknesses, shortcomings or blind spots.

Criticisms too often sound as though things would be a lot better, fairly quickly, were the boss to leave for a day or two, and the staff allowed to drive the bus. This is a dangerous train

of thought because few staff members have the management skills or ambition necessary to drive anything in operations. Operations people have a different kind and scope of training and preparation.

Second, the bus clearly belongs to management, which must drive wherever they want to go. We are on the bus as staff people, to help those who are driving do a better job.

If you want to be listened to and have an impact, start where the boss believes he or she is. Focus on establishing a relationship of trust and common direction with the boss. These are the relationship elements that matter.

Mutual recognition of a common direction provides the platform for fixing various other shortcomings that may indeed be present. Truly understanding the boss' perspective also may illustrate the relevance or irrelevance of staff concerns to achieving the boss' goals.

Speaking management's language means to avoid teaching the boss security, business continuity and recovery nomenclature, language and concepts. Rather, find ways to translate the functions you perform or want to accomplish into management's language.

Here are some examples of sources of terminology that can coexist easily in both worlds (security and management):

- Executive and management development
- Exposure management and issue surveillance
- Organizational and operational review and analysis
- Readiness
- Staff development
- Strategic planning

A great barrier to more effective staff use and input is reluctance to describe staff functions in management terms. A reason for this reluctance is that successfully describing these staff functions in management terms may lead to close questioning about why a function or activity exists at all.

Take the time to look at the services you offer, and recast them effectively in recognizable management language. If you find them difficult to translate, what you are developing may be too staff oriented. Let it go or fix it.

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