

Learning Tree Management Insights

Expert Advice from Today's Top Professionals

Five Steps to Managing Your Manager

– **Anita Caputo**, *author and authentic management and work-change resiliency expert*

Feeling completely overwhelmed, frustrated and dispirited after concluding a meeting with her manager Jim, Kim took a detour to her coworker Sally's office for some sympathy.

"I've had it with Jim!" Kim fumed. "I'm tired of his always taking credit for our team's work. He's always pointing out the negative—anything I do is never good enough. Yet when I ask Jim for clear direction, he won't make a decision. I wish I had a manager like yours—one who 'gets it,' who trusts and respects me; who cares about the work that I do."

Sally looked up from her desk, "You know, if you spent less time talking about Jim's incompetence and more time talking with Jim, you might actually solve those problems."

"It's not worth it," Kim answered, "Jim's not going to change."

"I used to think the same thing about my manager," Sally replied. "Then I realized that I had to take responsibility for being properly managed."

"I have to take responsibility for being *managed*?" Kim asked, puzzled.

"I did," Sally said. "I taught my boss how to manage me better. Listen, I know you don't like confrontation and would prefer to avoid rocking the boat. It's a lot easier for you to gripe to me than to talk to Jim, but nothing will change until you start understanding your problems with Jim."

"Well," Kim began, "Jim lacks expertise in my field—I know more about the details than he does. Yet he's unwilling to learn about those details or to understand the issues involved in my work at a deeper level."

"OK, that's your opinion and your attitudes, thoughts, and beliefs," said Sally. "Now, what are Jim's?"

"I don't know!" Kim snapped. "Who cares?"

"You should care because knowing Jim's perspective can help you understand your problems with him," Sally responded. "I know that Jim is responsible for multiple projects, one of which is yours. I also know that Jim is a 'big-picture' thinker. Jim feels it's enough for him to know enough about each project to ensure that the objectives of the department are being achieved. He relies on you to understand the details of your project. You may not know this, but Jim trusts you to make the best decisions for your project because he figures you know it best. He isn't indecisive; rather, he sees you as the right person to make those decisions."

"I can understand that," said Kim thoughtfully. "But I think some of those decisions should be made by him. And, if he wants me to decide, why does he keep taking credit for my work?"

"He doesn't take credit for your work, from his point of view," Sally replied. "When Jim presents information to stakeholders, he presents the information as his own because as the team's leader he's the person responsible. People know that the team reporting to Jim does much of the work. Jim feels he doesn't have to tell his managers the details of who did what."

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“But I have a need to feel valued, too. I would welcome it if Jim and the rest of the stakeholders would show appreciation for the work accomplished by each member of our team. I would like Jim to tell others of each team member’s contributions. He may think he’s stating the obvious, but he’s not.”

“Yes,” Sally concluded, “and you need to tell him that. If you don’t communicate with him, you are not giving Jim a chance to understand anything more about you than you understand about him.”

Later in the week, Kim asked Jim to have lunch with her at a quiet restaurant nearby. Kim presented her concerns in a way that was as neutral as possible, avoiding opinions and judgments that might make Jim defensive. To her surprise, she discovered that Jim was receptive to her concerns.

By taking Sally’s advice, Kim was taking the first step to teach her manager how to manage her better. The five steps below explain the process summarized by Sally’s advice, and are a practical reference for how you can begin influencing how your manager manages you.



Employees who have concerns about their manager’s management style often find it difficult to communicate those concerns to their manager, but it can be done. The five steps below will help you help your boss manage you better.

Step 1: Be Courageous and Committed to Positive Change

Be genuine in your intent to improve your relationship with your manager. Are you willing to put aside fear and other emotions that may be hindering you from addressing your concerns with your manager? Are you willing to take risks and invest in your relationship? Is a better relationship worth the risk to you? What’s the worst that can happen? If you think the worst that can happen is losing your job, then consider this: if your intentions are genuine and you truly are seeking ways to improve your relationship—and your manager’s intentions are also genuine—you will not likely lose your job. If you are unsure of your manager’s intentions, you need to consider that your current workplace may not be the best fit for you, and you need to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of addressing your concerns with your manager. In either case, no improvements can be made until you commit yourself to making a change.

Step 2: Start with You

Reflect honestly on your attitudes and behaviors to understand your underlying thoughts and beliefs. Ask yourself: “How may I be contributing to this situation?” Identify and understand how you communicate your thoughts and feelings both verbally and nonverbally. Positive change is only possible when you take responsibility for your own behavior as reflected in both your verbal and nonverbal expression.

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Step 3: Probe Perspectives

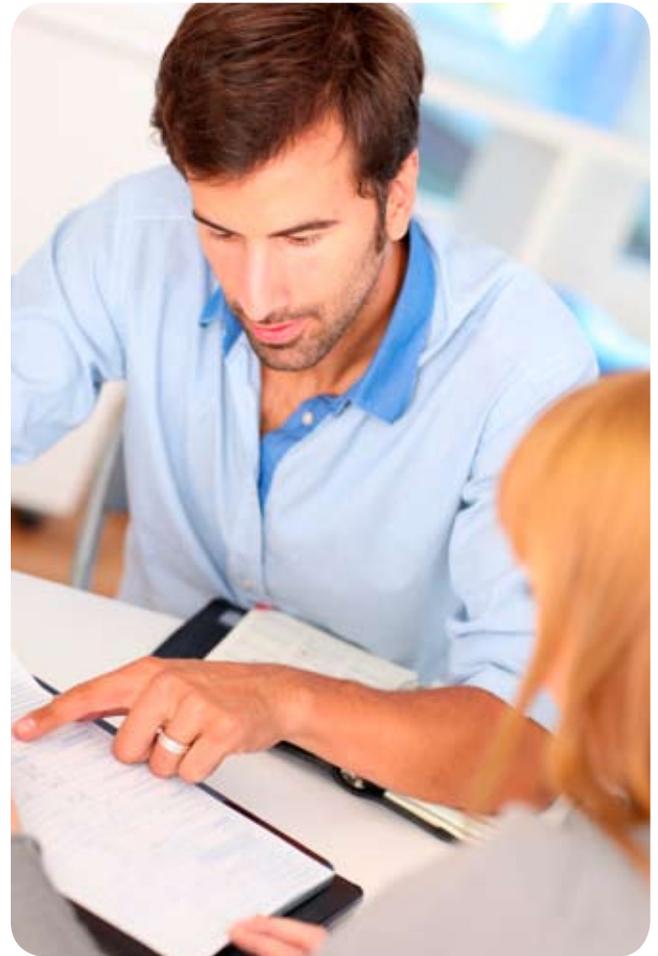
Make an effort to understand the perspectives of everyone involved, their needs, their attitudes, what they will gain or lose, their priorities, what they want to achieve and any underlying interests: these are the reasons that drive people to behave as they do. Begin with your own needs, priorities and expectations before moving on to those of your manager. Armed with an understanding of the meanings behind people's behaviors, i.e., an understanding of how they are different from yours, you can focus on improving how you work collaboratively in the future.

Step 4: Find the Common Ground

Clarify your needs and what you would like to change (writing them down helps). Be prepared to manage your emotions and your hot buttons by putting aside any feelings of hurt, anger or revenge that you have towards your manager. Be genuine about finding positive ways to move forward, and be clear about how you would like to work with your boss in the future. Take responsibility for finding ways for the two of you to respect each other's differences and trust each other's style of getting work done. Remember that both you and your manager want the work you do to be successful. Expect your manager to be a second set of eyes, someone who will ask tough questions that will give you the assurance that you've done a good job. After all, your success is also your manager's success.

Step 5: Meet and Work Out a Resolution

Now you are ready to have the conversation, which may not be so difficult after your investment in preparing for this very important meeting. Establish an environment of openness, respect and trust. This includes choosing the best time and place for open discussions (a place away from the office is often your best choice). The objective is to make it safe for each of you to openly discuss what's bothering you and what's important to you. Use active listening to productively communicate and focus on shared interests. Keep focused on the facts, consequences and your needs. Collaborate to find mutually beneficial solutions around the common ground you previously identified in Step 4.



About the Author

Anita Caputo, is an expert in authentic management and work-change resilience, and focuses on solving real business dilemmas with common sense "how to" strategies. She is author of *Promote Yourself* and coauthor of *Learn to Bounce: from a high-tech layoff to your ideal work*. She is also a management instructor at Learning Tree and teaches Course 290, "Management Skills," Course 222, "Leadership Skills: Success through Teamwork," and Course 902, "IT Relationship Management." E-mail: anita@bigpictureinstitute.com