

Leading Up: Five key strategies to influence bosses

By Rob Kramer

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An inspired man engages in non-violent civil disobedience to help catalyze an entire nation, freeing them from under the rule of Great Britain.

The above story is true and perhaps recognizable (Gandhi's work in India). We routinely hear epic stories of change and transformation, where the "little guy" overcomes the odds to win. But what does it look like in everyday life, where the challenges may not be so glamorous, yet the impact is important? For example:

A front line manager helps her boss to provide better support for her team's efforts, helping improve productivity and morale.

As human beings who work in organizations, we are all confronted with the reality that to get things done, we must rely on others. In particular, it is the key decision makers (management) who often affect the work environment. In Gallup's groundbreaking book, *First, Break All the Rules*, a key finding from their twenty-five year study on management was that people do not quit jobs; they quit bosses (Buckingham and Coffman, 2000). Thus, negotiating for resources, clarifying roles and responsibilities, or being comfortable simply asking for time off is impacted greatly by our comfort with our managers.

How then, do we influence management to change direction, to accept a new idea, or to follow our lead? Here are five principal practices to consider when leading up:

1. *Your success rate is best when you are seen as a high performer.* It is very hard to influence up if the boss do not see you as valuable, credible, and high performing. Consider: would you allow yourself to be influenced by someone who you thought to be unhelpful, lazy, or deceptive? To assess how you are viewed by the person you want to influence, first find out this person's standards and expectations. What does he believe high performance is? What does it mean to be credible in his eyes? How would he describe a valuable employee? Once you glean the



answers to these questions, weigh your capabilities to meet these expectations. Are you up for the challenge? And are you willing to do what it takes to be seen as a high performer by this person?

2. *Build a relationship of trust.* Research supports the importance of building relationships, thus developing trust, in the workplace. To build confidence with bosses, try these tips:
 - Assume this person is your ally. She wants you and the organization to succeed.
 - Clarify your own goals for the relationship. You may not want to be buddies who go bowling on Friday nights. Perhaps good collegiality and a shared commitment to the work would suffice.
 - Understand the strengths and resources you provide, and leverage these to support her goals as well as your own.

3. *Maximize your power as an influence tool.* It is a common misnomer that those in higher positions of authority have all the power. In fact, power can come from many sources. Expertise power comes from being the subject matter expert. Referent power means having a critical mass of willing followers, regardless of position or job title. There is also power through association. Who you know may influence what you can accomplish. Take time to analyze how you may have more power than you think.

4. *Manage up first, before trying to lead up.* "Managing up" means to leverage system norms to make life easier on your boss, not harder. For example, meet at times convenient for him, and keep your agenda short and focused. Bring all necessary documents to the meeting. Then use the opportunity lead up. In the meeting, ask for his help to prioritize the agenda. Be flexible and adaptable to his changing needs and priorities. Always be prepared to give status reports, to anticipate problems, and to offer solutions. In a 2007 study from MediaTec Publishing, a chief complaint amongst top management was that they got too much agreement and too little candor from their staffs. Take calculated risks to give honest feedback.

5. *Focus on what you can change.* It is unlikely that you will successfully "change" anyone. And while you cannot control bosses, you can control your attitude. And to a large extent, leading up is simply that: how you manage yourself and your emotions in order to affect others around you. Focus on what you can change, on your strengths, and the things you can do to leverage your power. Have clear goals and expectations.

Ultimately, in the end, it is as Mark Twain said, "Never try to teach a pig to sing. It wastes time and annoys the pig." You may not change your boss. However, with persistence, strategy, and choice, any one of us could make the profound impact of a Gandhi.

Where do you want to start?

Rob Kramer is the president of Kramer Leadership, LLC; a consulting firm dedicated the success of mission-driven leaders and teams. A manager himself for 15 years, Rob has provided executive coaching in a variety of business sectors, including health care and lab management, for more than a decade. He is the author of “Stealth Coaching: Everyday Conversations for Extraordinary Results” (Dog Ear Publishing, 2013).