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Help Your Boss Help You

Convert Conflict Into Opportunities

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Help Your Boss Help You

Convert Conflict Into Opportunities



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For Cheri, Mem, and Josh

Introduction

This book is about getting what you want in your career.

If you've ever worked in a hierarchical organization, you know that it can be difficult. While everyone in a company is working toward a common goal, the specifics of what your manager wants isn't always the same as what you want. Still, the key to succeeding lies in building a good working relationship with the person who has the most influence over your career. In a hierarchical organization, that person is your direct line manager.

The goal of this book is to show you how to build a productive, professional relationship with your manager so that even when you and your manager have different agendas, both sides can get what they need.

Who This Book Is For

The vast majority of advice found in the management literature is intended for managers, teaching them how to be effective leaders, how to bring about change, and how to rise through the ranks to executive levels. Almost nothing is written specifically for employees who are more interested in their professions than in rising through management ranks, but who still have to deal with managers all the time.

This book contains advice for anyone who has a manager, which includes pretty much every employee everywhere. The emphasis, however, is on working professionals who are not currently in the management ranks and may, therefore, have different priorities than their managers.

Some terms need to be clarified a bit:

- A *hierarchical organization* means one that contains supervisory levels that rise through the ranks until they reach the so-called C-level suite: CIO, CTO, CEO, and other variations. This book is primarily concerned with hierarchical organizations, though [Chapter 9, Dealing with Special](#)

[Cases, on page ?](#) includes a discussion of how the principles apply to flat organizations as well.

- A *line manager* is someone who controls your raises, promotions, assignments, and any related matters. People in that role perform periodic performance reviews for their direct reports. Note that a line manager is different from a team leader, who may have more responsibilities than you on a particular project, but ultimately has the same priorities as you.
- A *working professional* is someone who has a nonmanagerial career and cares more about that career than rising through the ranks of management, though they may consider management someday. That includes engineers, software developers, accountants, lawyers, physicians, actuaries, sales people, and more. If you care about the details of doing your job, learning about new developments in your field, and demonstrating technical experience, you're a working professional. Note that while most professionals require continuing education, and all are trying to learn more about their fields of expertise, no particular academic degrees are required in order to be considered a professional.

Chapter Summaries

The book chapters are intended to be read in the order presented, but that is not a firm requirement. You are free to skim or even skip any material you believe is not relevant to your situation or doesn't apply to you for one reason or another. That said, the earlier chapters tend to be more theoretical, describing the challenges and building the framework to deal with them. The last couple of chapters apply those principles to specific situations and review everything.

To help you decide what to spend your time reading, here are brief descriptions of each chapter:

1. If the goal is to help you get what you want, the first chapter talks about what professionals want from their careers and how that can differ from what managers want. Because the two don't always match, some conflict is inevitable, and therefore, it is in your best interest to plan for it. It also presents reasons why working professionals encounter bad or ineffective managers so often, and what to do when you're in that situation.
2. The second chapter is intended to be a "quick win," teaching you a technique known as "Good-Enough Answers" that you can use right away.

As a part of the overall goal of being a responsive employee, the ability to generate “good-enough” answers contributes to a healthy relationship between you and your manager, and does so in a manner that requires a minimum of effort on your part.

3. Chapter 3 talks about trust and loyalty and why they are so fundamental to a successful relationship with your boss. Part of that involves understanding the world of your manager, and what fears and constraints drive your manager’s behavior.
4. In Chapter 4, the lesson is that every interaction with your manager should be considered in the light of two fundamental messages you always want to send, colloquially described as “I got this” and “I got your back.”
5. Chapter 5 applies research into one of the most famous problems in mathematical game theory—the iterated prisoner’s dilemma—to the employee/manager relationship. A key result is to see how to push back against decisions you don’t like in a way that does not threaten the loyalty relationship and builds trust instead.
6. Communication is at the heart of any interaction with other people. Chapter 6 is about analyzing the behavior of your manager using personality-typing systems to help you frame your arguments in a way they are most likely to be heard and understood. This may be the most controversial chapter in the book. It is only intended to help you recognize certain types of behavior so that you can plan your communication strategy accordingly. Feel free to use only the parts you find appealing or helpful.
7. Chapter 7 is about the chain of command in hierarchical organizations. It talks about how to work within it and what happens when you violate that chain.
8. In any television show that includes an office environment, coworkers and their managers become friends, and sometimes even act like family. Unfortunately, that’s not reality. In the real world, trying to become friends with someone who has power over your career exposes you to significant traps and vulnerabilities. Chapter 8 describes those traps so you can avoid them, and helps you protect yourself while continuing to stay friendly.
9. Chapter 9 deals with special cases. It applies the principles covered earlier in the book to several specific circumstances, like working remotely, dealing with a flat organization, what to do when your boss is a so-called micromanager, how to handle a significant age difference between you

and your boss, and how to resolve the problems that arise when working for a truly unethical manager.

10. The final chapter, Chapter 10, describes a world in which you have established a healthy, productive, professional relationship with your boss and discusses a few topics not covered earlier.

Acknowledging My Own Biases

I don't normally like to talk about my own background, preferring to let the material speak for itself. The material in this book, however, is based on my own experiences in industry and academia over thirty-plus years, and you should be aware of that so that you can interpret the recommendations in that light.

My work experience has mostly involved the engineering and computer science fields, both of which are not terribly diverse in terms of race or sex, but are quite international. That means I've worked with people from dozens of countries and have friends all over the world, but most of my professional contacts have been men. To try to balance that, I've always tried to encourage and work with others different from me. With that in mind, I made a special effort to get feedback on this book from reviewers who have a wide range of backgrounds and experiences.

My academic background consists of two bachelor of science degrees, one in mechanical engineering and one in mathematics, from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). I then followed that with an master of arts degree and a PhD in aerospace engineering from Princeton University. Later, after working for about eight years at an industrial research lab, I went back to school at night and acquired master of science degree in computer science from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI). As a result, I was once introduced as having more degrees than a thermometer. All I can say is that when I talk about the "Game of School" in the second chapter, I know what I'm talking about. I also never had any difficulties impressing my girlfriend's parents. The girlfriends were another story entirely.

Following graduation, I joined the research division of a Fortune 50 company (in other words, at one of the largest companies in the world). My division had only about 1,000 employees, but the overall company had tens of thousands around the world. I spent twelve years there in various engineering and computer science positions. During my last two years there, I went back to school at night for my computer science degree, and after that I joined the

faculty of RPI as a part-time adjunct professor where I taught roughly one class every other semester for the next several years.

After I left the research center I joined a small, ten-person consulting and training company. There I spent five years teaching software developers how to code, primarily in Java, as well as how to use Groovy, Kotlin, Spring, Android, Gradle, and related technologies.

At one point I was seduced by a title and became Vice President/General Manager of the Hartford, Connecticut division of a large training company. There I learned a lot about management, and more about companies in the process of collapsing. After that company went out of business (not my fault), I formed my own one-person company. I've been President and everything else at Kousen IT, Inc., for the past sixteen years. While technically I don't have a direct line manager now, every client I have is effectively my manager. I also have several "friend of the family" contractor relationships with a few major clients, including the No Fluff, Just Stuff conference tour and a few other companies. The material covered in this book began as a talk on the No Fluff, Just Stuff tour several years ago, and has grown into training classes, keynote presentations, and eventually this book.

During most of my career (especially in the early years), I was considered a "talented, but high-maintenance employee," as one of my performance reviews put it. I have made pretty much every mistake possible when dealing with management, but those mistakes taught me the lessons covered in this book, and as a result, my later career has been much more interesting and successful than my earlier one.

Plural Convention

To refer to people and in particular, your manager, in a gender non-specific way, this book adopts the convention of using "they" and "them" as singular pronouns,¹ much the way the word "you" can mean either singular or plural. For example, when referring to your manager, I'll use the construct, "when you ask *them*, *they* will give you an answer," even when the manager is one individual. The industry seems to be adopting this convention rapidly, and it's easy enough to do once you get used to it.

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singular_they

References to Popular Media

Movies and television shows include scenes with employee/manager interactions all the time, and referring to them can be a good source of common experiences. The problem is that not everyone has watched the movies or television shows I want to highlight, and some are much more well-known than others. Therefore, any examples in this book describe the specifics of those situations in enough detail to make the necessary point even if you haven't watched the particular scene. If you are not familiar with a movie or show I reference, hopefully that won't be a problem. At minimum, it might result in a list of interesting movies and shows to watch in the future.

Online Resources

At the website for this book,² you'll find a collection of articles that expand on some of the topics covered here, as well as a discussion forum where you can communicate directly with me. Much of that material originated as topics in my free weekly newsletter, *Tales From the Jar Side*,³ and expanded in my blog, *Stuff I've Learned Recently*,⁴ where you can also add your own comments.

The Pragmatic exPress line of books was designed to be short and easy to read. Despite its length, this book is intended to be self-contained. Still, there is always room for improvement, and the online resources provide a convenient way to leave me feedback.

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2. <https://pragprog.com/titles/kkmanage/help-your-boss-help-you>
 3. <https://kenkousen.substack.com>
 4. <https://kousenit.org>