

Managing Your Boss, Sergeant Major Style

It's not manipulation—it's forging ties based on mutual respect and understanding

Do Sergeants Major manage their bosses or are they leading them? Is their relationship just manipulation of their rater? Is it brown nosing or sucking up? Or is it just a case of the Sergeant Major trying to establish their own power base in the shadow of their boss? Professional Sergeants Major will manage their boss for very good reasons: to get resources to do the best job, not only for themselves, but for their bosses and the organization. They will actively pursue a healthy and productive working relationship based on mutual respect and understanding—understanding of their bosses' strengths, weaknesses, goals, work styles, and needs. Here's what can happen when that don't occur.

A new boss with a formal work style replaced someone who'd been looser, more intuitive. The new boss preferred written reports and structured meetings. He wanted more face to face discussions with the Sergeant major and expected more details before making decisions. He wanted to know what the Sergeant Major was doing during the day and major issues he was working. His Sergeant Major found this too controlling. He blew off the meeting and seldom sent background information. When his boss finally caught up to him the Sergeant Major was often blindsided by unanticipated questions. His boss found their meetings inefficient and frustrating. The Sergeant Major was later relieved and reassigned.

In contrast, here's how another Sergeant major's sensitivity to this same boss's style really paid off:

This Sergeant Major identified the kinds and frequency of information his boss wanted. He did his homework and got answers to questions he anticipated his boss asking. He kept his boss informed of what he was doing and sent him status reports on major projects he was working. The result? There were more productive meetings occurring and the Sergeant Major was becoming an even more innovative problem solver than he was with his previous boss.

Sergeants Major often don't realize how much their bosses depend on them. They need cooperation, reliability, and honesty from them. Many Sergeants Major also don't realize how much they depend on their bosses—for links to the rest of the organization, for setting priorities, and for obtaining critical resources and support. Recognizing this mutual dependence, effective Sergeants Major seek out information about the boss's concerns and are sensitive to his work style. They also understand how their own attitudes toward authority can sabotage the relationship. Some see the boss as the enemy and fight him at every turn; others are overly compliant, viewing the boss as an all-wise parent.

The Idea in Practice— You can benefit from this mutual dependence and develop a very productive relationship with your boss by focusing on:

- **Compatible Work Styles.** Bosses process information differently. "Listeners" prefer to be briefed in person so they can ask questions. "Readers" want to process written information first, and then meet to discuss.

Decision-making styles also vary. Some bosses are highly involved. Touch base with them frequently. Others prefer to delegate. Inform them about important decisions you've already made.

- **Mutual Expectations.** Don't passively assume you know what the boss expects. Find out. With some bosses, write detailed outlines of your work for their approval. With others, carefully planned discussions are key.

Also, communicate your expectations to find out if they are realistic. Persuade the boss to accept the most important ones.

- **Information Flow.** Sergeants Major typically underestimate what their bosses need to know—and what they do know. Keep the boss informed through processes that fit his style. Be forthright about both good and bad news.

- **Dependability and Honesty.** Trustworthy subordinates only make promises they can keep and don't shade the truth or play down difficult issues.

- **Good Use of Time and Resources.** Don't waste your boss's time with trivial issues. Selectively draw on his time and resources to meet the most important goals—yours, his, and the organizations.