

## How to 'Manage Up' in a School Setting

Working to improve communication may help teachers have more say with their school leadership and boost their job satisfaction.

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As if educators didn't already have enough on their plates, many of us find that we also need to manage our supervisors—principals, superintendents, and others—so we can better serve our students. For example, you might have a supervisor who is mismanaging the allocation of substitutes or downplaying disciplinary issues. Or perhaps your supervisor simply has a different work style than you do.

If scenarios like these describe you or your situation, you aren't alone. A *2019 Robert Half survey* of workers showed that almost half of the respondents quit their jobs because of their supervisor.

But this doesn't have to be the end of the line. While occasionally supervisors can make our jobs more challenging, there are concrete strategies to skillfully "manage up."

### **WHAT IS MANAGING UP?**

When you manage up, you influence your supervisor in making decisions or taking action that's in the best interest of the organization. While the idea of managing the person you report to may sound strange, it's quite common, and we have experience doing this.

A supervisor who needs managing up might be a coach, assistant principal, principal, or district leader who is one or more of the following:

- Brand new,
- Completely hands-off or distracted,
- A micromanager,
- Inexperienced with teaching and learning,
- A know-it-all, or
- Indecisive.

## HOW TO MANAGE UP

Luckily there are strategies you can learn to help you manage up. First, think of an issue you believe your manager isn't handling well or isn't addressing. Next, think about what you'd like to propose to your supervisor. Below are four areas to consider to improve your communication, build trust, and take action to manage up skillfully. We use the acronym AAHH to remember these.

**Ask:** Speak to your supervisor to learn more about the issue. Be sure to ask clarifying questions—perhaps there's more to the issue than you thought. And listen to what your supervisor has to say. Asking questions will give you background information to help you understand your boss's perspective as you work toward a solution. It also creates a shared understanding of the issue. Asking questions is essential for creating openness and trust with your supervisor.

**Adjust:** A big part of managing up involves adjusting to your supervisor's leadership or work style. It's important to speak your manager's language. Some leaders prefer brevity, some want to see a detailed plan mapped out, and some want to be an active part of the solution. These are some suggestions based on specific supervisor types.

- **Micromanager:** Try to negotiate boundaries and make written agreements up front regarding who does what. Explain your ideal plan of action, and ask for the manager's approach. If the discussion becomes too detailed, find common agreed-upon standards and approaches. You can gain your supervisor's trust by delivering in areas important to them. Send regular updates to your supervisor. We like the "5-15 report"—spend 15 minutes writing regular updates that only take 5 minutes for your supervisor to read.

- **Indecisive:** First, find out your supervisor's reservations. Next, clarify all possible options and obstacles involved in making the decision. It may help to use a decision-making system (like listing pros and cons). Finally, draft a written proposal so that everyone is clear on the proposed plan.
- **All-knowing:** We've found that this type of supervisor needs to be heard and understood before you redirect them to your idea. Backtrack respectfully and often by saying back to them what they said. Present your proposal indirectly using words like *maybe*, *perhaps*, and *I was wondering* rather than challenging them directly. If they use statements like "We can't afford to make changes," blend with their ideas and doubts to move things along by saying, "Since we can't afford to make unnecessary changes...."

**Heart or Head?:** Some supervisors respond more to emotions, while others prefer facts. To convince the former, it helps to share stories and feelings behind your proposal. State your intention. Share how it might make a positive difference for specific people and the organization. If appropriate, share a brief story or scenario about a student or an educator.

Other supervisors are influenced less by emotion and more by reason, data, and projections. In these cases, make sure the solution you propose is evidence based. If your supervisor needs more data, be sure to fill in any necessary background information. Choosing the right approach is critical because some supervisors are influenced more by their heart, while others are more likely to follow their head.

**Hands:** Don't just dump a new proposal on your supervisor's desk. Be sure to explain precisely how you intend to help with this task or ask how you can contribute. Not only will it show that you're solution-oriented (not just complaining), but also it can build trust and buy-in.

In every scenario, the key is to communicate frequently with your supervisor. While initially it might seem like your supervisor is a roadblock to the work you'd like to accomplish, *with planning and a few adjustments* you can make a difference from wherever you are within the organization and ultimately boost your job satisfaction.