Managing Up

New York Nonprofits
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Effective Communication: Sharing Information Appropriately

As with all successful interpersonal interactions, effectively "managing up" requires effective communication skills. Effective communication involves knowing what information to share and what information not to share. Interestingly, it is often information that individuals do ***not*** share that can have a negative impact on their capacity to communicate effectively with their managers. Individuals often assume that certain information is not appropriate to sharer – they may consider the information too personal, they may be afraid that their manager will perceive their comment as complaining, etc. A good way to determine whether or not it is appropriate to share information with your manager is to consider how sharing or failing to share that information will impact your work relationship.

An example to demonstrate this point: Imagine that you are a new to an organization and in the process of developing a relationship with the executive director. You are scheduled to make an important presentation together. You were supposed to meet at 8:30am to help set up for a 9am presentation. You actually show up at 8:55, out of breath and looking a bit disheveled. Given just this information, what conclusion might your director reach about you and your work ethic? Possibly that you are disorganized, unreliable, and not adequately committed.

Now, imagine the same scenario but this time, as you rush into the room, you say to the executive director: "I am so sorry I am late. I meant to be here at 8:30 but my daughter woke up at 2 in the morning with a fever of 104 degrees and I had to take her to the emergency room. She's OK now but I only just got back from leaving her with her grandmother. I am completely prepared for this presentation, but would appreciate it if you would give me a minute or two to regain my composure." Now, what conclusion might your executive director reach about you and your work ethic? Probably that you are committed, well-prepared, and able to respond well to circumstances beyond your control.

Many individuals fail to share this kind of information for fear that it is too personal. Information that would be "too personal" might be intricate details about the number of times your daughter threw up during the night. But, information that is necessary to explain behavior that might otherwise leave your manager with a bad impression is information that is important for you to share.

Another example: Your manager gives you an assignment with a two week deadline. You realize that completing the work will take almost the entire two weeks. A few days after giving you that project, your manager gives you another assignment with the same deadline which also requires almost two weeks to be completed. Some individuals choose to say nothing for fear that to say anything might leave the impression that they are not sufficiently dedicated to their work –

they are afraid to say "no" to an assigned project. Unfortunately, failing to say something and then being unable to complete the assigned projects on time leaves a significantly negative impression.

What many individuals fail to consider is that without information from you, a manager may have no idea how long a project will take and may have failed to realize that she assigned you two similarly sized projects with identical deadlines. It is important to understand that rather than saying "no", it is possible to say "yes, but…" In this case, upon receiving the second assignment that would mean saying, "I would be happy to complete this project but I am currently working on another project for you that will take me about two weeks to complete. It's not possible to complete both within the time frame you have requested. Which of these would you like me to complete first? Which of them could be completed at a later date?" This way, you are providing information to your manager that he or she might not otherwise have, while simultaneously demonstrating your commitment to the work and to meeting assigned deadlines.

Perspective: Stepping into Your Manager's Shoes

Just as successfully "managing up" requires effective communication skills, it also involves being able to see situations from your manager's perspective. We are usually quite good at seeing situations from our own perspective. We are quick to point out what our managers say and do that make it easy or difficult for us to work with them. We are also quick to make recommendations about ways that our managers could improve the way that they work with us. An exercise that can help you gain a sense of how effectively you are able to understand your manager's perspective involves predicting what your manager would say about what makes it easy or difficult for them to work with you, or what they would recommend you do to improve the way that you work with them. After making your predictions, ask your manager these questions and see whether or not you were on point. If so, you are in a good position to manage up successfully. If not, you probably need to take some time to learn more about your manager's perspective.

Individuals often fail to take into consideration the fact that their managers, by virtue of being situated in a different place in the organizational hierarchy, have a different perspective than they do. Individuals at the top, middle, and bottom of an organization each have a different perspective. Each of these organizational perspectives provides the capacity to "see" different sides but also hinders the inability to see other things as well (blind spots). Those at the top of the organization have an "external" perspective; a long distance perspective. An executive director must be concerned with what the board of directors, funders, and community members think of the organization and its activities. Their chief concern is that no one in the organization does anything that will make them or the organization look bad.

Those at the bottom of the organization, on the other hand, have an "internal" focus. The view of these line staff members is that the individuals at the top of the organization know nothing about what it is like to do the work that they do so they should stop micromanaging them and just give them the resources they need to do their work. Finally, those in the middle of the organization, middle managers, are often torn by trying to simultaneously respond to the respective perspectives of those above and below them.

Just as each perspective provides a unique view, so too does each perspective contain "blind" spots. Thus, while those at the top of the organization may be able to see far into the distance, they may not be able to perceive what it is like for individuals who work at the bottom. Similarly, while those at the bottom of the organization may clearly see the details of their daily work requirements, they may not be able to understand the pressures and financial constraints experienced by those at the top of the organization.

What makes this model interesting is that is can be applied to any piece of an organization. Thus, in relation to others within the organization, the executive director has the "top" organizational perspective. However, in relation to the board, the executive director ends up with the "middle" perspective, caught between the external focus of the board and the internal focus of the managers who head departments and, in this instance, have a "bottom" perspective. At any point in time, an individual's organizational perspective depends on he stands in relation to others within that organization.

Being able to understand how one's organizational position impacts your perspective is an important tool for being able to communicate effectively to those individuals above and below you. It is important to keep in mind what their primary focus and chief concerns are so as to appeal to and focus on those when communicating with them.

Understanding Power Dynamics

Another important skill for effective managing up is an understanding of the dynamics created by power differences. In any organization with a hierarchy, those at the top of the organization have more power than those at the power. They hold the power to hire, fire, promote, demote, evaluate, compensate, and terminate. Those at the bottom of the organization are aware at all times of the power that those higher than themselves hold. Those at the top, however, are sometimes unaware of how their power impacts the way others interpret their behavior and relate to them.

For individuals on the lower rungs of the organizational hierarchy, power is often a filter through which they interpret the interests and desires of those on the higher rungs. Rather than engaging in direct communication to determine their manager's interests or concerns, individuals often make assumptions and act on them. A common problem that occurs as a result of this involves instances in which a manager assigns a project to a subordinate. When the assignment is given, the subordinate does not understand exactly what the manager wants them to do. However, out of fear that the manager will consider him incompetent, he fails to ask a question that he would have no hesitation asking of a person at the same organizational level.

It may not occur to the subordinate that the manager did not effectively communicate the request. Similarly, it may not occur to the manager that the subordinate might be afraid to ask a question. In fact, managers often complain about subordinates who fail to ask questions about a project assigned to them. They assume that the subordinate would easily ask a question if he had one and become annoyed when, as a result, the project is not performed as intended. The manager is

blind to the negative impact that the power differential is having and the subordinate, blinded by the power differential, is left with the impression that asking a question is impossible.

Allowing the fear engendered by this power dynamic to prevent you from managing communication with your manager is not an effective strategy. In fact, it will probably back-fire when you fail to complete the assignment. The more you and your manager know about each other's workplace-related needs, the more effectively you will be able to work together. Successfully managing up requires that you not allow power dynamics to prevent you from communicating directly with your manager.

Effective communication, the capacity to see situations from your manager's perspective, and an understanding of organizational power dynamics are important tools to enable you to successfully "manage up".

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