COPING WITH DIFFICULT MANAGERS

Manipulation has often been viewed as an inappropriate leadership tool. Such a view often stems from a misunderstanding of leadership.

Précis: Many are often strapped with managers who – because of their behaviors – slowly drive subordinates crazy and get in the way of effective work. The brief analysis below offers suggestions on how to deal with such managers so that the work can be done, and the worker can be happier in the work. It should be noted that if the techniques below do not work, what to work on next is your resume’. Suggestions below are listed under the type of dysfunction most prevalent in a manager.

Total Twits Who Meddle

These are folks who don’t have a clue what is really going on, yet think that they do. They also do not trust any subordinate. As such, they are always in your hair giving ridiculous advice. Ways of coping:

- Inundate them with paper or email Memos, reports, copy them on letters, your appointment calendar, etc.
- Ask them complex questions about tangential aspects of your work because “you want to pick their brain.” Ask if they might respond in writing so that you will have a written record to refer to in the future.
- With pad and paper in hand, when you start a project, ask them when they want check-ins and affirm that you are “on your own” otherwise. If they meddle, seem incredulous since you were planning to check-in on schedule. Make a big deal about their intrusion and reaffirm your pre-arranged check-in schedule.
- Share with them the management triangle, point out that this is the way you work best, and get their endorsement of the triangle’s concept. Then you have a tool that will help to keep them at bay.

5% Under close supervision
30% You might do it differently, but I am doing it
65% I’ve got it covered myself
- Strongly suggest bullet reports wherein you present bullets of your work and your supervisor picks those that she/he needs more info on. Keep those reports with your notes about the response.
- Send them to subordinates who are the “experts” on what they are talking about.
- Analyze the possible pitfalls of the direction that they are suggesting (including how it might look to their supervisors). Ask them if they still really want to go in that direction. If they do, email them a summary of the meeting (including your reservations) and send it to them. Keep a copy for yourself.

**Total Twits Who Don’t Meddle**

These are folks who don’t know that they don’t know, somehow got promoted to their present position, do God knows what in the office everyday, and stay out of your hair. Ways of coping:
- Frequently thank your Maker that they don’t meddle!
- Thank them for not meddling. “I feel so freed to do my work. I really appreciate your trust in me.”
- Carefully and frequently reassure them that you are “on top of it” and working to make them look good.
- Go for forgiveness rather than for permission. A permission request only confuses them and forces them to take a stand you may not want. You will almost always get forgiveness.
- Send them regular bulleted reports, and schedule a monthly update meeting. In your bulleted reports, note that you are looking forward to “my meeting with you on….”
- Tell them again how much you appreciate their hands-off style.

**Competent Twits Who Have The Ego Strength of a Slug**

This is a difficult one, for they are highly unpredictable and can become volatile very quickly. Because they are competent (and you are too) they need to feel that they are a bit more competent than you are. Ways of coping:
- Compliment them at any chance you get: *excellent comments at the meeting; it is a pleasure working for you; I admire how professional you are; let me run this by you for your wisdom; I need to pick your brain.*
• Ask them if they might serve as your mentor from time to time. You need to benefit from their expertise. (There is little need to utilize this, but you might note publicly from time to time that she/he is a mentor to you.)
• Give them credit for all successes. Be ready to own failures.
• Manipulate new ideas such that they seem to stem from the supervisor. Seem very excited about their idea and sit in some awe of them for their brilliance.
• Suggest to them that they should write a book to capture their amazing skills. Offer to help them if they want.
• Encourage them to seek a promotion to a higher position. (It may get them out of your hair.)
• Read all their professional papers (skim them) and tell them how good the work was. Ask them when they will write another and suggest some esoteric topic that they might want to tackle.
• Tell them that you don’t feel that they are appropriately appreciated at the top.
• Never gossip about them with others. It can easily come back to bite you – big time. Others may use your gossip to do you in.

Competent Supervisors Who Constantly Micromanage

These folks can and will drive you nuts. Whereas they seem to try at times to let things go, they simply cannot cease from intruding and therefore controlling tasks that are in fact yours. However, despite these folks being a bit insecure about “doing things the right way” (meaning their way), they have rather strong egos and can be dealt with more forthrightly. Ways of coping:

• These are often folks who adore check-off lists. Ask them to periodically prepare one for your work and post it in your office, checking things off very visibly.
• Show them the management triangle and try to achieve a more workable relationship in the 30% realm. Ask them to place your tasks within the triangle framework.
• If other persons on your level are being driven nuts as well, ask for a meeting with your supervisor as a group to discuss how her/his style may be getting in the way of production.
• Point out to them that since productivity is frustrated by their style, less is being produced. This lessens their “success rate” and may hurt them professionally.
• Suggest that perhaps an outside management consultant could be brought in to help all of you (not just them) find ways to make things work better.
• Note, often, that they are amazingly competent (which they are!). However, also note that in order to gain in your competence, you must be given more autonomy to complete your tasks in your own way.
• When an intrusion is about to occur, remind them that this was in the 95% realm – which they determined and agreed to. Hence, show utter confusion as to why they are butting in.
• This pattern often occurs with founders of organizations. If you are in this situation, good luck!

**Incompetent Supervisors Who Are Simply in Over Their Heads**

These are persons where cruel fate has caused them to be promoted to a position above their competency level. They generally know it and are afraid other people might find out (They already know!). Such persons are also very good at “kissing up,” and as such their supervisors may not be much aware of the situation. Ways of coping:

• Frequently remind the supervisor that you all are on her/his *team* and will work together with her/him to make it work.
• If a report needs to be delivered “upstairs”, suggest that you (or a peer) make the presentation to give the supervisor a chance to comment “as the expert” when it is completed.
• Exercise your latitude to work outside the white lines with others (including superiors) as a way to enhance interdepartmental collaboration and teamwork.
• If the supervisor feels the need to “take control” to prove her/his competence, agree to be a part of a strategy that allows the supervisor to set clear and broad parameters, write them down, and slowly ignore them.
• Fly under the radar scope. Don’t be underhanded – just self-contained in your work.
• Give her/him plenty of time to react to a number of bogus proposals, and then get approval for those you want by terming them “fast-track” projects.
• Look for employment opportunities in other department/divisions of the company.
• Try not to associate yourself too much with this supervisor. You want your distance to be a clear indication that you are not “tight” with this person.
• Do your work with your peers and act as though this supervisor doesn’t exist. Strategically keep them in the loop when it is a must, but not at other times.
• If they are in a position where they must speak for your department and/or about you work with their supervisors, provide them detailed “cheat-sheets” in writing and suggest that these be passed on to the supervisors.
• Suggest that this supervisor go to any seminar, training, conference, etc. that is away from the office.
• Make certain that your personnel file is accurate and positive. You have a power over this supervisor that you should exercise for your benefit. (She/he is a bit afraid of your competence.)