

Communicating With a Boss ... Straight Talk That Won't Get You Fired

Michael Staley

Determining the difference between what the boss *wants* to hear and what the boss *needs* to hear can be a daunting task. Wouldn't it be simple if the two were in harmony? The difficulty arises when they are at opposite ends of the spectrum.

Many years ago, I assumed a new position as the director of biomedical engineering at a 270-bed health care facility. I set up an appointment with my new boss to introduce myself and get an idea of his expectations. During this initial meeting, I realized that my position would have its challenges.

My new boss hated bad news and felt it was my job to ensure he never received bad news from my department. Eventually, I learned how to communicate *and* meet his needs. It seemed bad news was acceptable as long as a plan of action was presented at the same time.

It's All in the Delivery

Recently retired from the military, I've had 13 different bosses over the last 12 years. Each varied by different experience level, management style, and personality. A key to my success was being able to translate what the bosses wanted and needed to hear into what they had to hear.

I also realized the needs of the organization were more important than my own personal agenda. My focus was on one department. My boss normally had six or seven departments with functions that were inter-related. His/her decision had to be based on needs of the entire organization, not solely on the needs of biomedical engineering. At times, my department needed to make sacrifices to enable other departments to be successful.

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Understanding your boss' personality, experience level, and management style are crucial to your success. These factors will have a direct influence on your boss' goals, how they process information, and handle stress, which will ultimately determine their decision power within the organization. Getting to know your boss will help you translate and present information that can be effectively used for resource planning and operational decisions.

Most of my bosses have not been technically oriented. If I required their decision on a technical issue, I presented the information in terms that was understandable and not in the "biomed" lingo. Reports need to be simple, accurate, and relevant. There is a time and place to use technical terms, but it is not when giving your boss data to process for a decision or data he or she may have to defend or explain in your absence.

Playing Your Part

It is important to understand your role and how it fits into the strategic plan of the organization. Most organizations have a formal or informal strategic planning process. Your role and efforts need to align with this plan. If you are unsure of the direction of the organization, you have research to do. To be a value-add to the organization, your efforts must support the vision of senior management.

Many times, I have found departments did not know, much less understand, their role in this process. Resources were being expended that had nothing to do with the overall goals of the organization. You also have to "buy" into the strategic plan, and your role in its success. If not, you should probably find an organization with goals that you support. Organizational actions or decisions may require extra effort from your department, but it may be what's required for success.

Just the Facts

In the business of managing medical equipment, credibility is essential. Your boss must be able to trust what you say, your commitment, and your actions. Credibility

and integrity go hand in hand. Once they are lost, it is difficult if not impossible to get them back.

An unacceptable phrase in a biomed's vocabulary is "I don't know." We are the technical experts and are expected to know. The reality is that we can't know everything, but we should be able to do the expedient research needed to find the answer. Half-truths or partial information can ruin credibility. We love giving the boss information that reflects our hard work and successes, but it is difficult to provide information that generates concern over productivity or resource needs. Information that raises these concerns should be seen as opportunities for success rather than failure.

The key lies in analyzing of the data and presenting a plan of action to improve productivity or justify resource needs. I had one boss tell me that she would not accept "no" when she assigned me a project. I wondered if I should immediately look for a new job or wait until I had to tell her "no." I found out later that "no" was an acceptable answer, but only after I came back to her with a valid explanation and justification for other options. Being able to explain or justify a position with hard facts is key to building credibility. Decisions are made and resources expended based on what we say; credibility and integrity are key to this process.

One Size Doesn't Fit All

Learning how and what to communicate with your boss will set the organization up for success. You need to understand your boss' expectations regarding the information requested and how it should be presented. If you deviate by subtracting or adding information, or editorializing what your boss should or should not see, you are playing with fire and will eventually get burned.

Find out what your boss needs and give it to him or her as clearly and concisely as possible. Recognizing that the difference between a boss' need for a five-bullet explanation or a two-page information paper is key to your success. It will also reduce both of your frustration levels.

Timing is Everything

The glue that holds this fabric together is patience, persistence, and timing. Many organizations encourage short-term gain, but this is often at the expense of long-term success. Reducing the bottom line seems to be a top priority in almost every performance review.

Effective utilization of resources should always be a criterion used to evaluate performance, but there are

times when reduction of resources can be counter-productive to an organization. When the strategic plan calls for expansion of the organization, reducing the bottom line at the wrong time can jeopardize the success of the effort. Timing is everything.

Persistent preparation will prepare you to execute when opportunity knocks. Patience will keep you from trying to execute too soon. You have to anticipate and be prepared to provide timely, accurate information. If you understand your boss and your role in the organization, it will be much easier to anticipate what you need to provide, and your credibility will allow your boss to accept recommendations without reservation. You are responsible for taking the lead, and your success will reflect directly on your entire department. ■

Gieras Named ACCE President, Other Leaders Appointed

Izabella Gieras has been named President of the American College of Clinical Engineering (ACCE) for the 2004-2005 term.

Gieras, who most recently served as ACCE's president-elect and is a member of AAMI, is a senior clinical engineer with Beaumont Services Company.

Other newly appointed ACCE officers—who are all members of AAMI—include:

- ◆ President-elect Steve Grimes, senior consultant and analyst with GENTECH. He also chairs the organization's HIPAA Task Force.
- ◆ Vice President Ron Baumann, corporate director of clinical engineering for ARAMARK's Clinical Technology Services.
- ◆ Treasurer Joe Skochdopole, director of Finance with TriMedx.
- ◆ Secretary Colleen Ward, clinical engineer at the University of California Davis Health System.

In addition, Bill Rice, a clinical engineer in Ft. Wayne, IN, will serve a two-year term as the Member-At-Large.



Izabella Gieras



Steve Grimes