

Coaching Up



A lot of nurse managers and leaders ask me how they can have better relationships with their bosses. The question comes in different forms, but the essence remains the same. See if you identify with any of these examples:

- “I need resources to get the job done, but every time I approach my boss, she is preoccupied, doesn’t listen, or just says ‘no.’”
- “My boss means well, but he doesn’t understand what’s going on in my unit.”
- “I do a good job, and I feel like I’ve ‘tried everything’ to please my boss. Still, she seems to have made up her mind about my work, and her conclusion is negative.”
- “I am doing well in my position. My boss encourages and believes in me. I have the potential to do a lot more, and I’d like for my boss to mentor me, but she is so busy that I hesitate to ask.”
- “My boss micromanages me.”
- “I don’t like my boss’ values. All she thinks about is managing to the bottom line.”
- “Despite my best efforts, I can’t seem to communicate successfully with my boss (or the board or the CEO).”

These and other variations on the theme of strengthening our relationships with our bosses come up again and again in my executive coaching sessions. One best practice for managing this significant challenge is what I call “coaching up.”

Just what is coaching up? Let’s start with what it is not. It is not a manipulative way to get the boss to see it our way. It is not borne of the belief that there is one right way—ours! Nor does it support a conscious or unconscious belief that the boss is wrong.

“Coaching up” means learning and using well tested coaching and communication skills that promote authentic, positive, and productive relationships with *all* of the individuals who are involved in our

success. When coaching up techniques are applied to our most significant professional relationship, the boss, they enrich mutual understanding and often reduce frustration and stress.

While no specific tool ever guarantees success, coaching up techniques have a very good track record. Here are some examples of strategies for leaders.

Get Into the Right Frame of Mind

When we are committed to coaching up, we work hard to suspend negative judgments about the boss, whether these are conscious and crystal clear or faint and subtle. Either way, these attitudes influence how we interact with our boss. Suspending them does not mean we have to delete them completely and forever, but it does mean that we need to put them aside at least temporarily. We need to do this so they do not interfere with being fully present in our interactions. Focusing on the here and now means we engage from a position of genuine interest in improving our relationship with our boss.

Become Curious

When we coach up, we move into a state of being that is genuinely curious and interested in our boss’ point of view. We may want to know more about her position, how she feels about something, or what he needs to fully support us. These are just three examples of ways in which we can demonstrate our interest. There are many others.

Listen With Respect

From a place of openness, we listen with our full attention. We ask clarifying questions when needed, and we continue to disregard judgments and distractions that arise during our conversation. When we disagree, we try to become even more curious. We ask questions like “What factors are influencing this

decision?” or “Please help me understand this.”

Practice the Art of the Question

We ask open-ended questions rather than questions that are answered with “yes” or “no.” We begin our questions with “how” and “what” as often as we can.

Manage Paradox

While effective leaders know their options and their plans, they are also open to shifting gears if they receive persuasive new information. They know that they may not always have the full picture of what’s involved in the complex challenge of running a health care organization. This is particularly true when working with bosses who have a much broader organizational perspective than we do.

Communicate Requests and Needs Clearly

In my coaching, I often encounter nurse leaders and managers who are passionate and clear about their solutions. But when we role play or talk about how they communicate with their bosses, their commitments can come out sounding wishy-washy, diluted, or filled with qualifiers that would confuse any listener. Sometimes this happens because the leader does not articulate clearly. But often it’s because mental chatter is preventing her from speaking effectively.

Attend to Your Boss’ Communication and Learning Style

Some learners are visual while others are auditory. Some like big-picture information, while others prefer lots of detail; some like crisp bullet points, others like longer pieces; some like to be told after actions have been taken, and some like to know our every step before and during our tasks. Do you know your boss’ communica-

tion preferences? If not, it’s time for a curious conversation!

Negotiate Your Differences

For example, if your boss likes to be informed of your unit’s key activities on a daily basis, ask how she would like to receive that information. If she says she wants a written report, and you don’t have the time to compose that each day, ask if she would accept a weekly written report, along with a daily phone message covering the day’s highlights. She may say yes, and she may say no. If she says no, offer another solution that will meet her needs as well as your own.

Understand Values’ Differences and Seek to Find Common Ground

You may not agree with your boss’ values (eg, being driven by the bottom line vs providing high quality patient care), but there may be ways to coexist. From a position of inquisitiveness, discover what is important to your boss. For instance, ask what prompted her to go into health care or what she most likes about her work. Chances are she will divulge something that you can appreciate or understand. This can create a sense of common ground and shared values, at least to some extent. Knowing and valuing your boss’ history may give you something in common on which to build. As you continue to coach up, you may improve your opinion and feelings about your boss.

Share Your Perspective and Openly Ask for Your Boss’ Point of View

When you are discussing an important mutual concern, ask questions like “What are you seeing that I am not seeing?” If your boss wants your help with something, ask “How can I support you?” If you want your boss’ backing or

mentoring, be specific about the ways you want your boss to support you. Ask what you can do to make it possible for her to say yes.

These and similar strategies are what I call coaching up. When we use this approach, we are taking the initiative to form a respectful and supportive relationship with the boss. We are laying the groundwork for a positive and productive alliance, and we are significantly enhancing our chances of successfully working together.

Even if negative judgments do creep back in from time to time, we have tools to work toward mutual understanding, if we choose to use them. Coaching up isn’t a magic bullet, but it is a very good way to enrich our partnership with the boss—that most significant of all organizational relationships.

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