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Trouble Connecting With Your Boss? Study How They Present, and Copy It.

Adam Bryant

Managing up can be a big challenge. Your boss is busy, and even when you do have time with them, they can seem distracted or impatient. But here's a smart tactic to get their attention from [Mark Gumz](#), the former CEO of Olympus Corporation of the Americas and a colleague of mine at [The ExCo Group](#), where we do senior leadership development and executive mentoring. In our conversation, Mark also shared smart insights how to be a better team player (an essential skill if you want to move up).

Q. What are most common themes that come up when you're advising senior executives?

A. One is how they can manage up more effectively. Some of that relates to when they need to challenge their boss about something, but it's also about making sure that they're providing the right information so that the leadership is able to make an informed decision. And while it may seem simple, this can be hard because sometimes the people you're managing up to aren't as receptive as you'd like them to be. So you have to put yourself in the best position to be heard.

Another one comes up when people are promoted into a management team. I talk to them about the importance of appreciating the other people at the leadership table. While each of them has gotten there because of their performance in their particular area of the business, now it's especially important to respect what others are responsible for and how you can work as a team to help accomplish what needs to be done for the overall company.

Q. Let's go back to the first point. What are the best tactics for figuring out how to convey a message to your boss that they may not want to hear?

A. Let's assume that what you need to tell the boss is really important, so how you deliver the message is critical. You don't want to waste anyone's time, especially the boss's, because they've got a lot of people coming to them with different agendas. We have a lot of information

available to us today because leaders' speeches for company or industry events may be recorded. If you study them, you can often learn how these leaders like to present information. Usually the way that they like to present information is also how they like to receive information.

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I gave that advice to a client, and we found that their boss was very consistent in how they delivered their message – very brief and succinct, with clear, actionable items and challenges for the audience. Before my client's big presentation to the leadership team, we crafted his talk in a similar fashion. About halfway through the conversation, the CEO said, "Where did you come up with this? This is one of the best presentations I've had at this company." And he turned to the executive committee and said, "I want all presentations to follow this model going forward."

Q. Let's go deeper on the second point you made earlier about leadership teams. Is the team impulse not a natural one for most people?

A. I don't think it's unnatural, but most people get promoted because they've done a good job managing their particular wedge of the pie. But now they are part of a management team and their individual piece of the business is not going to survive on its own, if you will, because it coexists with other parts of the organization.

If you're now at that level and if you're aspiring to get to the top, you need to be spending time listening to what needs to happen and reaching across the aisle to help other people accomplish what they need to get done. This is how some people will be recognized – not just as team players but as people who can synthesize all that's going on, whereas others will reveal themselves as being derailleurs because they can't take the focus off themselves and their part of the pie. If you hope to move up, people are going to be looking at how well you manage within a group and then, ultimately, how you would manage that group.

Q. If you want to be a team player but your colleagues don't have the same impulse, how can you build those relationships if they see the world as a zero-sum game?

A. You would obviously not take on the entire group at one time, but if someone's not wanting to cooperate or collaborate, then you can have a one-on-one with that person and explain why you're trying to do what you're trying to do. If they're still not interested, you can say, "I'm just here to try to help you be successful. I'm not assuming that I'm the one that's going to control your success here, but if I can be of assistance, then I want to be."

Q. When you were a CEO yourself for many years, how did you set the tone on your leadership team that people were going to work together?

A. First of all, the tone from the top is not just words. It's about actions, and demonstrating a few key things. No. 1 is being vulnerable and not being afraid to say, "I don't know, what do you think?" This enables people to feel more comfortable to say they don't know and then to ask others for advice or for information. Leaders at times think that being vulnerable could be a weakness but it is in fact a strength.

Q. I find that some leaders struggle with this idea of vulnerability – what to share and what not to share. How do you think about that?

A. It's about putting yourself into a situation where there's a certain amount of risk but there's a certain amount of gain. And if you don't put yourself into the situation, you may still have the risk but you'll never have an option on the gain. If you never admit that you don't know something or signal that you think you know everything, no one will believe or buy into that. "It's about putting yourself into a situation where there's a certain amount of risk but there's a certain amount of gain."

By the same token, if you say, "This is my point of view, but I'm willing to hear other points of view. What else should I be considering?" then that is opening the door for people to have a conversation. As a leader, that puts you into a vulnerable position because you may not know which way that conversation's going to go. But people appreciate that opportunity to express themselves.

Q. A lot of people are reluctant to have tough conversations about performance. Are you comfortable having those talks?

A. I wouldn't say that I was comfortable, but I was uncomfortable if I left something

unresolved. You're not going to be able to resolve every conflict, and while there are risks, there are also potential rewards. I always felt that I needed to at least make the effort and start the conversation. To avoid it is to perpetuate something. And remember, others are watching you. They're looking at how the leader deals with these kinds of situations. It's an opportunity to model behavior.

Q. If you look back on your leadership career, what have been the most important leadership lessons you've learned?

A. It's not about me; it's about the team. If the team wins, the team won; if the team loses, it's the coach's fault. And if I spend too much time focusing on me and not on the team, it's likely that we're not going to succeed. You have to empower people and put them in a position where they have the ability to make decisions and recognize that mistakes are going to happen but you're going to learn from those and we're going to go forward.

Q. How did you learn that lesson?

A. From working in situations where there was too much control from the top and realizing that the result could have been different if everyone else had been allowed to participate. You have to listen to people who are doing the work and give them a chance to participate in developing the plan because they're the ones who have to execute it.

The final point is about the importance of passion. It is so important for you to be passionate about what you're trying to accomplish, because people have to have the faith to follow you. And sometimes it's a leap of faith because they may not know exactly where they're going, but because of how you conducted yourself and because you've made them feel included, they'll follow you.

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