Help Your Boss Help You

Convert Conflict Into Opportunities

Ken Kousen

Foreword by Glenn Vanderburg

Edited by Michael Swaine

Early praise for *Help Your Boss Help You*

I highly recommend *Help Your Boss Help You*. This book is like having a seasoned mentor to validate your experience when you're having conflict with a manager, help you see the big picture from different perspectives, and show you the ropes on how to respond so that you build trust with your manager and ultimately, motivate your manager to support your goals and development.

➤ **Seth Axelrod, PhD**
Associate Professor of Psychiatry, Director of DBT Services, Yale School of Medicine, Yale New Haven Psychiatric Hospital

Help Your Boss Help You outlines one of the greatest methodologies and strategies for managing upward. Ken's experience working with managers at all levels gives an unparalleled perspective on how to succeed in the workplace, and his hard-learned lessons are something we can all benefit from. *Help Your Boss Help You* is required reading for career-minded people.

➤ **Daniel Woods**
Distinguished Engineer, Target

This is the first book I've read that effectively explains the long-term relationship between managers and their employees from the subordinate's perspective. Having served in both roles, I believe the term "constructive loyalty" is a mantra that should form the basis of all relationships, professional and personal.

➤ **Tom Fulton**
President, Mentor Communications, Inc.

This might be the most important (non) technical book you'll read. Frameworks come and go, but the wisdom contained in these pages will pay dividends for the rest of your career!

➤ **Michael Carducci**
Lead Architect, IHS Markit

I have a bookshelf full of tech books covering everything from "agile" to "zsh" but only a few books on the people side of development work. This book will deservedly take its place alongside *Understanding the Professional Programmer* and *The Politics of Projects*. Congratulations on a great book.

➤ **James Harmon**
Independent Consultant

I really wish I'd had this book right at the beginning of my career. There's solid, actionable advice I know I would have benefited from. The examples and advice have also helped me see there are times when the employee/manager relationship cannot be fixed, and that in those times it's right to look for something that fits you better.

➤ **Trisha Gee**
Java Champion and Lead Java Advocate, JetBrains

I wish I had this book to read when I was starting out in the corporate world. Its lessons are quick to read, easy to understand, and most of all, right on the money. It really is a clear book with good organization that should be passed out to entry-level hires in any technical-related field.

➤ **James A. Lutz, PhD**
T.W. Daniel Associate Professor of Forestry, Utah State University

Help Your Boss Help You was a very useful read. It's ideal for people just starting out in their careers or at the mid-point looking to advance. Ken explains the things that unfortunately many of us have had to learn the hard way after dealing with difficult managers. Highly recommend!

➤ **Annyce Davis**
   Online Video Instructor, Davis LLC

I wish this book had been around 25 years ago! Many parts of it really resonated with me and with the experiences I have had. I think it will be extremely helpful for anyone who is looking for ways to better manage or improve the relationship with their manager. The prose is engaging and easy to read, and I enjoyed the popular culture and *Star Trek* references.

➤ **Meg Watson**
   Software Engineer, XID

We've left this page blank to make the page numbers the same in the electronic and paper books.

We tried just leaving it out, but then people wrote us to ask about the missing pages.

Anyway, Eddy the Gerbil wanted to say "hello."

Help Your Boss Help You

Convert Conflict Into Opportunities

Ken Kousen

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For Cheri, Mem, and Josh

Contents

Foreword

I'm a latecomer to management. I spent twenty-three years in consultant and individual contributor roles before making the leap into management eight years ago. All along the way, I participated in discussions about "managing your manager" or "managing up." The topic always seemed to have a whiff of either failure or subversion: either the boss was so poor, or the relationship so broken, that the employee had to resort to misdirection or manipulation to deal with them. It seemed like an unfortunate inversion of the way things *should* work.

However, now that I've been a manager for a few years, I see things very differently. There are completely valid reasons—arguably unavoidable reasons—why managers and their employees have different goals and priorities. Your relationship with your boss is a challenging one, and it's worth your while to understand why that's so, and to learn how to approach it constructively and with open eyes. Yes, some managers are terrible, and sometimes your relationship with your boss can go very wrong. This book includes advice that can help you in those situations. But the book isn't just about dysfunctional management relationships. Even if your boss is a great manager, the material here will be helpful: it will help you understand your boss's needs, assist with their own tricky balance between *urgent* and *important,* and respond to their requests with aplomb. Managers will be grateful that you have come to the job so well-equipped.

In other words: this book is really about being a great employee.

The business world is full of things that nobody teaches you. I think to some degree that's inevitable; it might seem strange to say, but there are skills and lessons that are almost impossible to teach, even though they can be learned through experience. There's a term for that kind of thing: "street knowledge." Before reading *Help Your Boss Help You,* I might have put "becoming a valued ally to your boss" in that category. But Ken Kousen has figured out how to teach skills that will help you do exactly that. Here you'll find a framework

for thinking about your relationship with your boss; conceptual tools for understanding different kinds of managers; and practical, constructive techniques for handling ambiguous requests, messy situations, and conflict.

There are hundreds of books about being a better manager. A lot of managers read them and try to put those recommendations into practice, and some are successful. There are even more books about being good at frontline jobs. Software developers, for example, can choose from thousands of books about technologies, tools, techniques, practices, and processes.

But I'm not aware of any other book quite like *Help Your Boss Help You*. It's a book for learning how to be a really valuable employee, now and in the future: helping your boss, making them look good, all while advancing your own growth and career goals. When you read Ken's book, you'll benefit from it. So will your family, your career, and your company. And yes, even your boss.

Glenn Vanderburg

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June 3, 2021

Acknowledgments

The basic ideas included in this book began as a presentation entitled "Managing Your Manager" on the No Fluff, Just Stuff conference tour.[1] The talk eventually evolved into a keynote address at conferences like UberConf in Denver, Colorado, and DevNexus in Atlanta, Georgia. I am very grateful to the head of the No Fluff, Just Stuff tour, Jay Zimmerman, for his support throughout my years of being a regular speaker on the tour. I also wish to mention my other friends on the tour who have given me feedback on the talk, including Nate Schutta, Stu Halloway, Matt Stine, Neal Ford, Mark Richards, Venkat Subramaniam, Jonathan Johnson, Craig Walls, Dan Hinojosa, Brian Sletten, Michael Carducci Cary, and Pratik Patel.

A few years ago, a revised version of the presentation turned into a video recording and an ongoing training course on the O'Reilly Learning Platform.[2] I'm very grateful for the support there of several editors over the years, including Susan Conant, Nancy Davis, and Suzanne McQuade. Their ongoing support on the O'Reilly platform has been greatly appreciated.

When Susan Conant became Managing Editor at The Pragmatic Bookshelf, she persuaded me to stop threatening to write this book and finally propose it. I'm very grateful to her and other members of the team at the Prags, including Tammy Coron, Dave Rankin, Margaret Eldridge, and my current editor, Michael Swaine. This book never would have been completed without your capable assistance. I'm still amazed at how much the material grew and changed during the process of writing the actual book. The result has far more depth and substance than I ever anticipated.

I want to give special thanks to all the reviewers who took the time to give me feedback on the text itself. Your advice and suggestions have been appreciated and improved the book more than you know. Thanks go to Rebecca and Seth Axelrod, Dick and Darlene Burrell, Susan Conant, Annyce Davis, Tom Fulton,

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1. https://nofluffjuststuff.com
2. https://learning.oreilly.com

Trisha Gee, James Harmon, Sandra Hartdagen, Jim Lutz, Helen Scott, Meg Watson, Erik Weibust, and Dan Woods. Thank you again for your contributions and recommendations.

I should also apologize for all the pain I caused my various managers as I was learning these lessons. I'm especially grateful, however, to Dave Sirag and Nancy Golden, two managers who taught me that management could be done both kindly and well. I learned so much from both of you. Looking back, I must admit I learned much over the years from all of my managers who were clearly trying their best. I'm sure if I knew then what I know now, our lives would have been much easier.

Last and most important, I need to thank my wife, Ginger, who has heard me mull over all of the ideas in this book too many times to count, not to mention living through the mistakes I made as an employee that caused me to learn them in the first place. She even did a very helpful read-through of the entire text and made many helpful suggestions to improve it.

While many people contributed to the lessons described in the book, any errors or omissions in the text are entirely my own. I hope you enjoy reading it half as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Ken Kousen
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June 7, 2021

Introduction

This book is about getting what you want in your career.

If you've ever worked in a hierarchical organization, you know that it can be difficult. While everyone in a company is working toward a common goal, the specifics of what your manager wants isn't always the same as what you want. Still, the key to succeeding lies in building a good working relationship with the person who has the most influence over your career. In a hierarchical organization, that person is your direct line manager.

The goal of this book is to show you how to build a productive, professional relationship with your manager so that even when you and your manager have different agendas, both sides can get what they need.

Who This Book Is For

The vast majority of advice found in the management literature is intended for managers, teaching them how to be effective leaders, how to bring about change, and how to rise through the ranks to executive levels. Almost nothing is written specifically for employees who are more interested in their professions than in rising through management ranks, but who still have to deal with managers all the time.

This book contains advice for anyone who has a manager, which includes pretty much every employee everywhere. The emphasis, however, is on working professionals who are not currently in the management ranks and may, therefore, have different priorities than their managers.

Some terms need to be clarified a bit:

- A *hierarchical organization* means one that contains supervisory levels that rise through the ranks until they reach the so-called C-level suite: CIO, CTO, CEO, and other variations. This book is primarily concerned with hierarchical organizations, though Chapter 9, Dealing with Special

Cases, on page 107 includes a discussion of how the principles apply to flat organizations as well.

- A *line manager* is someone who controls your raises, promotions, assignments, and any related matters. People in that role perform periodic performance reviews for their direct reports. Note that a line manager is different from a team leader, who may have more responsibilities than you on a particular project, but ultimately has the same priorities as you.

- A *working professional* is someone who has a nonmanagerial career and cares more about that career than rising through the ranks of management, though they may consider management someday. That includes engineers, software developers, accountants, lawyers, physicians, actuaries, sales people, and more. If you care about the details of doing your job, learning about new developments in your field, and demonstrating technical experience, you're a working professional. Note that while most professionals require continuing education, and all are trying to learn more about their fields of expertise, no particular academic degrees are required in order to be considered a professional.

Chapter Summaries

The book chapters are intended to be read in the order presented, but that is not a firm requirement. You are free to skim or even skip any material you believe is not relevant to your situation or doesn't apply to you for one reason or another. That said, the earlier chapters tend to be more theoretical, describing the challenges and building the framework to deal with them. The last couple of chapters apply those principles to specific situations and review everything.

To help you decide what to spend your time reading, here are brief descriptions of each chapter:

1. If the goal is to help you get what you want, the first chapter talks about what professionals want from their careers and how that can differ from what managers want. Because the two don't always match, some conflict is inevitable, and therefore, it is in your best interest to plan for it. It also presents reasons why working professionals encounter bad or ineffective managers so often, and what to do when you're in that situation.

2. The second chapter is intended to be a "quick win," teaching you a technique known as "Good-Enough Answers" that you can use right away.

As a part of the overall goal of being a responsive employee, the ability to generate "good-enough" answers contributes to a healthy relationship between you and your manager, and does so in a manner that requires a minimum of effort on your part.

3. Chapter 3 talks about trust and loyalty and why they are so fundamental to a successful relationship with your boss. Part of that involves understanding the world of your manager, and what fears and constraints drive your manager's behavior.

4. In Chapter 4, the lesson is that every interaction with your manager should be considered in the light of two fundamental messages you always want to send, colloquially described as "I got this" and "I got your back."

5. Chapter 5 applies research into one of the most famous problems in mathematical game theory—the iterated prisoner's dilemma—to the employee/manager relationship. A key result is to see how to push back against decisions you don't like in a way that does not threaten the loyalty relationship and builds trust instead.

6. Communication is at the heart of any interaction with other people. Chapter 6 is about analyzing the behavior of your manager using personality-typing systems to help you frame your arguments in a way they are most likely to be heard and understood. This may be the most controversial chapter in the book. It is only intended to help you recognize certain types of behavior so that you can plan your communication strategy accordingly. Feel free to use only the parts you find appealing or helpful.

7. Chapter 7 is about the chain of command in hierarchical organizations. It talks about how to work within it and what happens when you violate that chain.

8. In any television show that includes an office environment, coworkers and their managers become friends, and sometimes even act like family. Unfortunately, that's not reality. In the real world, trying to become friends with someone who has power over your career exposes you to significant traps and vulnerabilities. Chapter 8 describes those traps so you can avoid them, and helps you protect yourself while continuing to stay friendly.

9. Chapter 9 deals with special cases. It applies the principles covered earlier in the book to several specific circumstances, like working remotely, dealing with a flat organization, what to do when your boss is a so-called micromanager, how to handle a significant age difference between you

and your boss, and how to resolve the problems that arise when working for a truly unethical manager.

10. The final chapter, Chapter 10, describes a world in which you have established a healthy, productive, professional relationship with your boss and discusses a few topics not covered earlier.

Acknowledging My Own Biases

I don't normally like to talk about my own background, preferring to let the material speak for itself. The material in this book, however, is based on my own experiences in industry and academia over thirty-plus years, and you should be aware of that so that you can interpret the recommendations in that light.

My work experience has mostly involved the engineering and computer science fields, both of which are not terribly diverse in terms of race or sex, but are quite international. That means I've worked with people from dozens of countries and have friends all over the world, but most of my professional contacts have been men. To try to balance that, I've always tried to encourage and work with others different from me. With that in mind, I made a special effort to get feedback on this book from reviewers who have a wide range of backgrounds and experiences.

My academic background consists of two bachelor of science degrees, one in mechanical engineering and one in mathematics, from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). I then followed that with an master of arts degree and a PhD in aerospace engineering from Princeton University. Later, after working for about eight years at an industrial research lab, I went back to school at night and acquired master of science degree in computer science from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI). As a result, I was once introduced as having more degrees than a thermometer. All I can say is that when I talk about the "Game of School" in the second chapter, I know what I'm talking about. I also never had any difficulties impressing my girlfriend's parents. The girlfriends were another story entirely.

Following graduation, I joined the research division of a Fortune 50 company (in other words, at one of the largest companies in the world). My division had only about 1,000 employees, but the overall company had tens of thousands around the world. I spent twelve years there in various engineering and computer science positions. During my last two years there, I went back to school at night for my computer science degree, and after that I joined the

faculty of RPI as a part-time adjunct professor where I taught roughly one class every other semester for the next several years.

After I left the research center I joined a small, ten-person consulting and training company. There I spent five years teaching software developers how to code, primarily in Java, as well as how to use Groovy, Kotlin, Spring, Android, Gradle, and related technologies.

At one point I was seduced by a title and became Vice President/General Manager of the Hartford, Connecticut division of a large training company. There I learned a lot about management, and more about companies in the process of collapsing. After that company went out of business (not my fault), I formed my own one-person company. I've been President and everything else at Kousen IT, Inc., for the past sixteen years. While technically I don't have a direct line manager now, every client I have is effectively my manager. I also have several "friend of the family" contractor relationships with a few major clients, including the No Fluff, Just Stuff conference tour and a few other companies. The material covered in this book began as a talk on the No Fluff, Just Stuff tour several years ago, and has grown into training classes, keynote presentations, and eventually this book.

During most of my career (especially in the early years), I was considered a "talented, but high-maintenance employee," as one of my performance reviews put it. I have made pretty much every mistake possible when dealing with management, but those mistakes taught me the lessons covered in this book, and as a result, my later career has been much more interesting and success-ful than my earlier one.

Plural Convention

To refer to people and in particular, your manager, in a gender non-specific way, this book adopts the convention of using "they" and "them" as singular pronouns,[1] much the way the word "you" can mean either singular or plural. For example, when referring to your manager, I'll use the construct, "when you ask *them*, *they* will give you an answer," even when the manager is one individual. The industry seems to be adopting this convention rapidly, and it's easy enough to do once you get used to it.

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1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singular_they

References to Popular Media

Movies and television shows include scenes with employee/manager interactions all the time, and referring to them can be a good source of common experiences. The problem is that not everyone has watched the movies or television shows I want to highlight, and some are much more well-known than others. Therefore, any examples in this book describe the specifics of those situations in enough detail to make the necessary point even if you haven't watched the particular scene. If you are not familiar with a movie or show I reference, hopefully that won't be a problem. At minimum, it might result in a list of interesting movies and shows to watch in the future.

Online Resources

At the website for this book,[2] you'll find a collection of articles that expand on some of the topics covered here, as well as a discussion forum where you can communicate directly with me. Much of that material originated as topics in my free weekly newsletter, *Tales From the Jar Side,*[3] and expanded in my blog, *Stuff I've Learned Recently,*[4] where you can also add your own comments.

The Pragmatic exPress line of books was designed to be short and easy to read. Despite its length, this book is intended to be self-contained. Still, there is always room for improvement, and the online resources provide a convenient way to leave me feedback.

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2. https://pragprog.com/titles/kkmanage/help-your-boss-help-you
3. https://kenkousen.substack.com
4. https://kousenit.org

Making Inevitable Conflict Productive

Conflict with your manager is inevitable because you want different things. That's okay, though, because conflict means there are ways to satisfy both sides. The fact that your goals and your manager's goals are different leads to conflict, but you can plan for that and use it to your advantage. As we say in computer science: *it's not a bug; it's a feature.*

In fact, conflict is a fundamental part of all business relationships. Customers want the best quality products for the lowest price, while vendors want to keep costs low and charge whatever the market will bear. Senior managers want the rewards that come with taking risks, but need to avoid risks that threaten the company in its current markets.

In successful businesses, you can often find ways to work with both sides that makes each feel like a winner. Customers get good products they can afford, while the company makes enough profit to grow the business. The company adds enough unique value that it is the best source of the products customers want. Managers are able to adapt to changing market conditions in a way that doesn't threaten to put the company out of business.

In the relationship between employees and managers, where does conflict come from, and how can you build a relationship that gives both sides what they want?

This chapter focuses on answering those questions, starting with analyzing what you want, how that is different in significant ways from what your manager wants, and how understanding the nature of the conflict leads to opportunities to work together productively.

Differing Agendas

Why are your goals different from those of your manager? The reason is that your job differs from your manager's job in fundamental ways, which means the rewards and incentives for each of you are different as well. They overlap, though; otherwise, why work together in the first place? It's just that the overlap isn't complete. Consider the following figure, which is a Venn diagram showing your agenda and your manager's agenda.

We try to operate here

Your Agenda

Your Manager's Agenda

These still happen
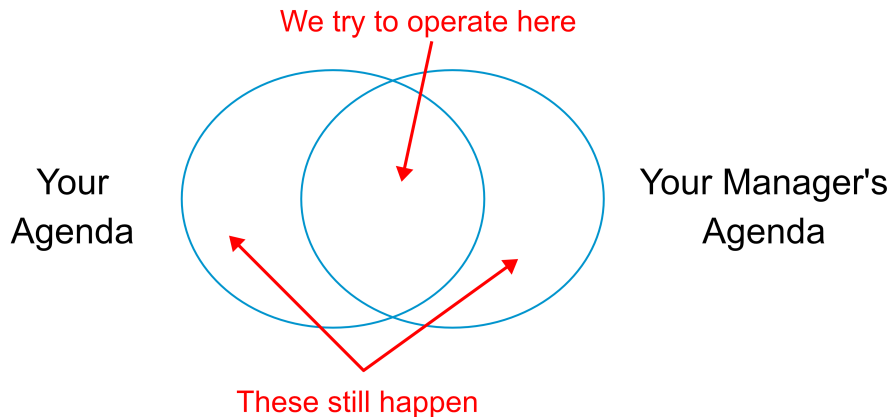
You have an agenda for your job, your career, and your life. It involves doing your job well, learning about new developments in your chosen field, and dealing with any work-life balance issues that evolve as you grow older. Your boss also has an agenda for their job, their career, and their life. While we mostly operate in the overlap, there will be times when what you want won't match what your manager wants, and vice versa.

It's not hard to imagine a situation that fits your agenda and not your manager's. To choose an example from software development, say your company has implemented its back-end systems in Java, but you attend a presentation on one of the alternate languages that run on the same platform, like Groovy, Clojure, or Kotlin. You're fascinated, and decide to read one of the top books on the subject (no doubt from The Pragmatic Bookshelf). Not only do you like the elegance and sophistication of the newer language, but also you know that learning it will help you become a better developer, and, as a side benefit, may open up new career opportunities for you in the future. You, therefore, want to try out the language on one of your current projects. Because you're deploying to the existing infrastructure, everything should work in the end. Eventually.

The problem is, you know convincing your manager to let you go in a completely new direction is a tough sell. You are proposing a change from what you already know into a new technology with which you have little or no experience for benefits that may never materialize—and without the expertise necessary to fix any problems that may come up. At best, your manager is going to be reluctant to go along with that.

Therefore, you decide on your own, without talking to your manager, to carve off a small piece of your current project and build it using the new language. You'll do it after hours, except that the tasks will inevitably creep into work time. After all, you're still making progress on a work project, right? Unfortunately, there's also the mental energy you are going to expend on the new approach that you might have applied to existing tasks, but hopefully the benefits will be worth it. If everything works, you'll later present the new implementation to the team as a *fait accompli,* minimizing the amount of effort that went into it. As a side benefit, you will also improve your resume, which may turn out to be necessary if your manager finds out what you've been doing and isn't happy about it.

On the other hand, if the new approach fails, nobody ever has to know about it, right?

> **What to Think About: Side Projects**
>
> Have you ever created a separate project at work just to learn a new tool or technology? If so, you're not alone. Did it work? Did you later share what you learned with others on your team, including your manager? More important, did your manager find out about it before you were ready to share? How did you handle that?

Consider the best possible outcome from that experiment. You implement a new subsystem in say, Kotlin, and everything works. You understand the underlying problems much better than before, and the new system is far more robust and powerful. When you demonstrate the new system to your group, everybody is impressed and agrees that your code is valuable.

As a side result, you are now the company expert on Kotlin, which has both advantages and disadvantages. It may be good for your career, but from your manager's point of view, you've introduced a single point of failure into the system. Now you are the only person who can maintain that system. You say you're willing to help others in your group learn it, but inwardly you know how much time and effort it took for you to really understand the new language. When you talk to the rest of your group, you may minimize the time

and effort coming up to speed required, but nothing worth doing is ever easy. Major transitions only appear straightforward after you've already made them.

The boss also may be glad that you—and, by extension, the group—have a new skill that they can potentially market to clients, but now you're the only resource who can handle that work. At some point in the future you may decide to leave, transfer to a new group, or simply get bored and want to do something else. What will the group do then?

As a natural reaction, the boss may decide to bring in a junior employee to work with you on a project. That way you can train this person on what you've done and how to go forward. That will give the team another resource and still get the job done. Unfortunately, from your perspective, that can be viewed as a problem. It may feel like the boss is trying to create a junior version of you. That person is likely to be less expensive and, perhaps more important, more willing to go along with what the manager wants. Apparently you have a problem doing that, as you just demonstrated that if you believe a new direction is worth following, you'll do so without telling anybody first.

In effect, from your perspective, the boss is asking you to train your own less expensive, more cooperative, replacement.

You can try to object, but in this case—as in the vast majority of cases—what your boss wants is likely to be much more aligned with what the company wants than what you want.

Company Agenda   *Greater Overlap*   Manager Agenda
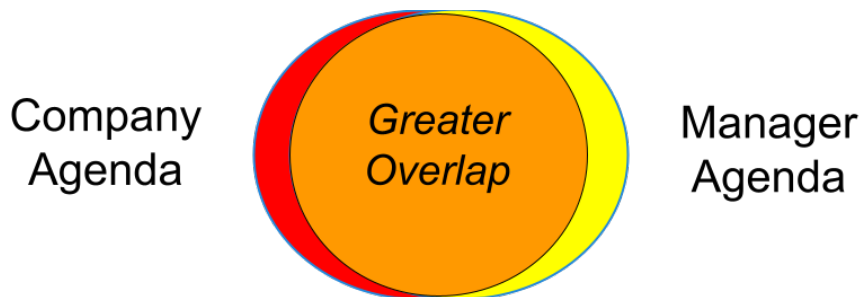
That's a common (though not inevitable) occurrence; your manager's priorities are usually going to be better aligned with those of the company. The higher level the manager, the more that will be true. In any conflict between you and the manager, you are automatically placed at a disadvantage. As far as the company is concerned, if there is a conflict between you and your manager, the company would prefer that you do what your manager tells you to do.

Even worse, what if your manager wasn't happy about your change in direction? The situation just described comes from what those in IT call the

"happy path." Consider the alternative: what if the manager is angry at you? What if your boss tells you never to make a major change like that again without prior approval? What if they insist you redo the work on the system, but with the previous approach?

Now you are in a difficult situation. In any conflict between you and your boss, most employees believe they have only two possible courses of action:

1. You can go along with what the manager wants.
2. You can leave.

The problem is, neither of those approaches get you what you want. If a manager knows you'll just go along with whatever they ask, there's no incentive for them to modify their behavior in the future to accommodate your desires. Of course, you can't *not* do what they say, either. Passive aggression has its uses, but direct challenges to the boss's authority are also unlikely to get you closer to your goal, and may even get you fired.

Managing the Relationship

The difficulty comes from viewing the employee/manager relationship as a problem to be solved, rather than a long-term situation that must be, for want of a better word, *managed*. Working professionals are problem-solvers and tend to see the world in those terms. We want to fix problems and thereby make them go away. Your relationship with your boss is not like that. By viewing the relationship as a situation to be managed rather than to be solved, you can try to create a balance between you that evolves over time and ultimately gets both sides what they want.

The term that will be used in this book for such a relationship is *constructive loyalty*. Once you have a solid relationship with your manager based on constructive loyalty, you approach any potential conflict with your manager differently, with clear, honest communication that ultimately gets both sides what they need.

The following list summarizes some of the techniques that build a relationship like that, many of which will be discussed in more detail in future chapters:

- You and your manager *meet regularly,* so you can talk about what you'd like to do in the future (such as learn a new language) during one of your periodic meetings.

- You understand better *how to communicate* with your manager, so you can express your interests and concerns in a way your manager is most likely to hear and understand.

- You provide the boss with arguments they can use to justify the new approach to their bosses, and will *have their back* if problems arise.

- Your boss knows you will find a way to build and maintain the new system, regardless of approach. They know *you got this,* meaning you will take responsibility for the success of the project.

- You and your boss build up a history of successfully dealing with conflicts. Over time, you established that if the boss says no, you will *push back*, but in a way that doesn't threaten the constructive loyalty relationship.

Any disagreement, therefore, is not a crisis. It's an opportunity to express what you want and to encourage the manager to help find a way for you to get it—if not this time, maybe the next time, or the time after that. If you want to use a new language on the current system, you talk to your boss about it. Maybe you decide to just implement tests that way in order to stay off the critical path. Maybe you choose a less vital part of the system for your experiments. To satisfy the single-point-of-failure problem, maybe you arrange a book club or a "lunch and learn" group to share what you've learned. Perhaps your boss can arrange to bring in an outside resource to help, like a consultant, or provide access to an online library or arrange for a training class.

Instead of each party trying to help themselves exclusively, hoping for the best rather than discussing it, conflicts are recognized as a fundamental part of the relationship and both sides plan accordingly. You're playing the long game. You may not get exactly what you want in this particular conflict, but you are building a relationship that you can rely on in the future.

To accomplish this, it's important to understand what each of you want from your careers.

Why We Go to Work

Here's a simple question: why go to work at all?

In an ideal world, your job would be rich and fulfilling, where you are an expert at something the world needs and that a company pays you a lot of money to do. That's a lot to ask, especially early in your career when you're still figuring out who you are and what you want out of your career and your life.

In the movie *Office Space*,[1] the protagonist Peter Gibbons experiences a life-changing revelation during a session with an "occupational hypnotherapist." As a result, he decides that he doesn't like his job and he's simply not going

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1. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0151804/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1

Popular Media References

Many examples in this book will refer to scenes from popular media, mostly from movies and television. Media examples provide a short-hand for interesting scenarios that can be easily accessed and shared. Don't worry if you are not familiar with the source material. All the relevant details will be provided. If nothing else, hopefully the examples will give you a playlist of entertaining examples that are relevant to the employee/manager relationship.

to go any more. "I don't really like it," he says, "and I'm not going to go." When asked what he does want, he admits his goal is to do nothing at all.

For most of us, while the idea of having no obligations is appealing, doing nothing doesn't satisfy our real needs. If your reason for working is for the money, that's understandable but incomplete. What do you want out of your job, your career, or even your life? Those are difficult questions, whose answers will likely to change at different points in your career. What you want at age 20 is not necessarily what you'll care about at age 30, or 40, or 50. Money definitely matters, however, especially when you don't have it.

One way to think about what you want is in context with the classic model known as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs.[2]

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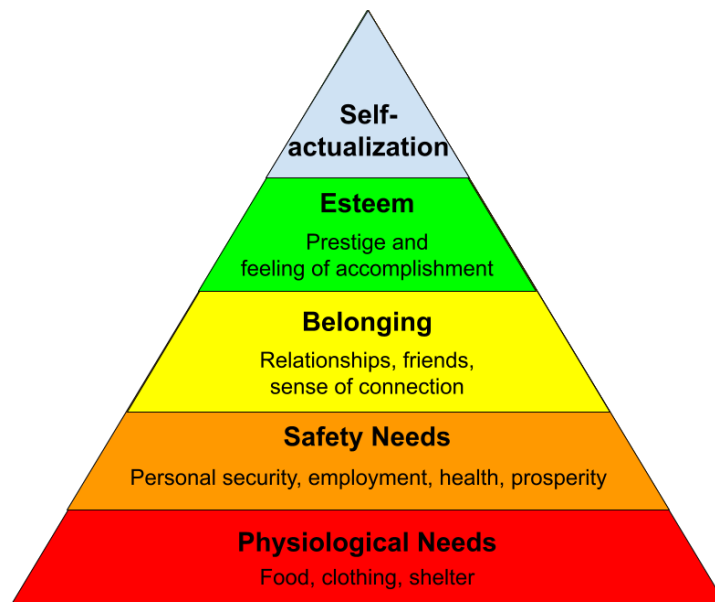
2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow%27s_hierarchy_of_needs

Maslow's hierarchy is a psychological theory proposed by Abraham Maslow in his 1943 paper, "A Theory of Human Motivation" published in the *Psychological Review*. While the theory has evolved over time and has many interpretations, it provides a convenient way to think about what you want. The lowest level of the pyramid (physiological) has to do with fundamental needs like food, clothing, and shelter. A lack on this level provokes a crisis. If physiological needs aren't met, nothing else matters.

The next level above is called safety, which has to do with all forms of security, from personal and emotional safety to financial well-being. Monetary issues arguably are at the lowest level, but insecurity about your job fits better on the safety level.

Beyond that are interpersonal needs involving friendships, family, and intimacy. Because we spend so much time at work, it's easy to conflate the work environment with friendships and even family, but that's a trap that will be examined in detail in Chapter 8, Your Boss Is Not Your Friend, on page 99. Still, we all want to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance, which is the subject of the belonging level.

Above that lies esteem, which has to do with achieving recognition, status, importance, and respect from others. When you do your job well, you receive professional respect from your boss and from your colleagues.

Finally, a few people manage to reach the self-actualization level, sometimes expressed as "be all you can be." This is the long-term goal of knowing you're doing all you can to maximize your potential in a fulfilling way. At that level you demonstrate mastery in your chosen field. That's a lot for anyone to reach, but seems like a worthwhile goal.

Ken says:

High Levels Take Time, Effort, and Some Luck

Don't worry if you are not currently at a high level in Maslow's hierarchy. It takes time to learn what you want, effort to acquire the skills necessary to achieve it, and sometimes a fair amount of luck to find a position that lets you do what you want and still support your family.

It's important to go through the exercise of figuring out what you want, however, especially because the results are likely to change over time. Sometimes you'll discover that what you want isn't at all what you thought you did when you were younger.

From a career point of view, to move up the hierarchy you need to know that your job is reasonably safe and secure, that you have opportunities to learn

and grow, and that you will receive the respect that is your due as you become an expert in your field.

Professionals care about their careers. One definition of a professional is someone who cares more about the technical details of their job than simply making another dollar for the company. Everybody would like more money, but once you move beyond the lowest levels of Maslow's hierarchy, money is not enough.

A quote from antiquity usually attributed to Aristotle states, "Happiness is the exercise of vital powers, along lines of excellence, in a life affording them scope." That implies that a professional wants a job that:

- provides autonomy,
- allows them to use their strengths, and
- promotes learning and development

all in ways that produce results they can be proud of and that earn respect and rewards.

What to Try: Understanding What You Want

Consider reevaluating your career goals on a periodic basis. This can be challenging because if you have invested a lot of time, energy, and money into a particular career, you may feel obligated to continue with it. This urge not to "waste" that investment is part of what is called the *sunk cost fallacy.* A sunk cost[3] pertains to the costs that have already been spent and can never be recovered, whether you change directions or not.

As you learn and grow, however, you are able to bring your entire life experience to new opportunities. Every few years, try writing a personal mission statement describing your ideal job or career. If it is quite different from your current position, it might be time to change directions.

A job that gives you the freedom to do what you do well, while enabling you to still learn and grow, sounds like it ought to be good for the company, too. So the question becomes, isn't that what your manager wants as well? Don't they want the same things you do?

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3.   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunk_cost

What Your Manager Wants

The simple answer is, your manager wants the same things you do, as long as those things make money for the company. But the money matters more to them than it does to you, because the way managers are rewarded is different from the way you are. A manager is evaluated, at least in part, based on how much their group contributes to the company's bottom line.

Companies exist to make money. In the end, that's all they care about. Managers face this fact all the time, and the higher level the manager, the more they focus on what the company needs.

That means that even at the low levels of management that professionals normally encounter, the manager's job is different from your job, so their priorities and incentives are different from yours as well, and the biggest difference comes down to the emphasis on money.

The movie *Office Space* tries to express this fact humorously by showing a banner across the work area that reads, "Is This Good for the Company?" in bold letters. Everything else is secondary.

What to Watch: When Money Is Tight

When times are good, money flows into the company, and sometimes this shows up in added benefits, like the latest equipment, access to training, bringing in industry leaders to speak on the latest technologies, and maybe even better food in the cafeteria.

A company is a consumer of resources, however, and if those resources are not available, it will consume itself. Watch what happens when times get difficult. Suddenly all those perks you've come to expect go away, there is a search for expenses that can be eliminated, and ultimately people start losing their jobs. Hard economic times are a crisis for a company, and it will react accordingly.

Incidentally, the emphasis on money is one reason professionals promoted into management are often unhappy. As technical people, they care about their profession more than anything, and they were so good at it that they were promoted into a job with very different priorities. Suddenly they have to care about financial matters that always felt secondary before, and that's a hard adjustment for many new managers to make. This topic will be revisited in Chapter 3, Creating Constructive Loyalty, on page 25.

The emphasis on money grows more pronounced as you deal with managers higher up in the chain of command. The overlap between what managers want and what the company wants grows more pronounced, until you reach the executive level, at which point they are often indistinguishable.

Ken says:
Money First

A friend of mine is a retired senior vice president at a Fortune 50 company. One day an engineering problem escalated up to his level. He convened a meeting of all the relevant personnel, including his direct reports, the technical people in charge of the problematic system, and anyone else who might be affected. That meeting had one goal: figuring out how much money was required to buy their way out of the problem. Would they have to pay a fine? Contract out to another firm? Pay for additional equipment or other hardware? Every decision came down to costs.

After the meeting, the technical people approached him and offered to describe the actual details of the problem. Because this is an engineering company that promoted from within, he too had an engineering background and enjoyed those discussions. But the important point is that those discussions were always secondary to the decisions about money.

It's not that professionals don't want their employers to make money. Everyone would like to see that happen. It's just that managers care more, partly because they are evaluated and rewarded based on the financial performance of their groups, and partly because they are not as directly involved in the details of the technical jobs. So there's an overlap in what both sides want, but it's not complete. Sooner or later there will be conflict.

In the complicated world of employees and managers, there is an added complication: your boss is probably not very good at their job, and both of you know it. If you think about it, there's a clear reason for that, which is the subject of the next section.

Why Managers Are So Bad So Often

If you're lucky enough to have a good manager, count your blessings and enjoy the situation. Working for a good manager is easy. You don't need a book to give you advice on how to work for a good manager, because if you make mistakes or are unsure of what to do, they'll tell you. Good managers believe part of their job is to show you what practices have worked for them over the years and explain why they feel a particular way. Good managers

provide space for you to focus, get you resources you need based on reasonable requests, and help when political issues arise within the organization.

The problem is, we rarely get to work for good managers. In fact, the reputation of managers, especially in the IT world, is pretty horrible. One reason for this is that technical professionals are not in the managerial chain of command, and therefore, technical people report to the lowest level of management. That means the most common situation is that technical people have to deal with managers who are:

- the least experienced, and/or
- the least proficient

at their jobs. Managers who are good at their jobs either move up the hierarchy, or they find other opportunities that give them greater responsibilities or different experiences with the company. Great managers rarely stay in one place for very long.

It's no wonder professionals get a bad impression of managers. The managers they deal with are either rookies who don't know what they're doing yet, or older managers who were never good enough to move up to higher levels. A special category includes former technical performers who moved into management without any formal preparation for the new job other than a few friendly pep talks and maybe a quick training course.

If you are a successful technical person, the situation is made worse in other ways. A lot of technical people find it frustrating that decisions that affect them are being made by someone who knows less than they do. "Why should nontechnical people," the thinking goes, "be telling the technical experts what to do?"

This attitude comes from a fundamental misunderstanding of the differences between a technical job and a managerial one, and is summarized by the expression, *professionals advise; managers decide.*

That phrase will come up again. Working professionals understand the problems and presumably know how to implement solutions. A manager needs to weigh competing solutions and decide which course of action to take, relying on their employees to carry it out.

The problem is, how can managers make decisions when they don't have your skills and experience? For one thing, they have you. Good managers know that you're the actual expert, so they ask for your opinion. On the other hand, they don't feel obligated to follow your recommendations. They collect information from a variety of sources, both technical and other, including financial

considerations, political concerns, the career goals of the team, and more. They have to balance a conflicting set of goals in order to produce what the company wants and needs, both in the short run and hopefully in the long run as well.

Professionals Advise; Managers Decide

Don't make decisions for your manager. Nothing angers a manager more than trying to usurp their authority. Most employees who violate this do so by accident, forgetting that a manager's job is to make decisions and set priorities for the group, and theirs is only to influence those decisions.

As a technical professional, present your manager with alternatives and let them pick one. Because you're the expert, you have the freedom to show alternatives any way you want, keeping in mind that the manager will probably want to verify them. Let them choose which alternative to take, and then do your best to carry it out.

Making decisions is one of the perks of being a manager, but it's also one of the drawbacks. One problem is that rarely do managers have all the information required to make good decisions. This situation will be re-examined in Chapter 3, Creating Constructive Loyalty, on page 25.

Another complicating factor is that managers have to act like they know what they're doing even when they don't. They can't be too obvious in expressing their own insecurities in a business environment, or no one will follow them. Being able to *fake it until you make it*, as the saying goes, is a survival skill at work, and especially for managers because they have to persuade technical employees to follow the decisions that nontechnical managers make. A manager, even a low-level one, has to act like they know what they are doing, especially when they have no idea what the right decision might be and they are terrified they're making a mistake.

That's a more extreme statement than intended. Managers live with risk as part of their jobs. Good managers accept that and find ways to handle it. Bad managers often let the fear manipulate them, sometimes by delaying decisions, or deflecting blame, or appealing to others to decide for them. Regardless of whether they are bad or good, however, they have to hide the resulting fear and indecisiveness in order to preserve any credibility.

The inexperience of most managers handling technical people, combined with the fact they need to project confidence even when they don't feel it, often

Ken says:

A Little Knowledge Can Be a Good Thing

I had a manager once who hadn't done technical work in years. During a progress report with the team, we tried to explain why we were having trouble deciding among a complicated series of trade-offs.

The manager thought for a moment and then said, "Why don't you try *X*?"

We looked at each other, surprised. The suggestion was simple, but actually made sense. When we told him that, he laughed. He had only read one review article, so he only knew one option, and that turned out to be a good compromise. As "experts" we knew too many possibilities—and were paralyzed as a result.

It helped that this was an established relationship. We knew the boss was bright, even if nontechnical, and had a history of listening to his team and only offering insights afterwards.

gives working professionals a low regard for management in general. Still, it is the manager's job to make decisions that affect your career. From the employee perspective, the best you can hope for is that your needs and desires are an important consideration when those decisions are made.

Putting It All Together: Building a Relationship

You have an agenda for your job, your career, and your life. So does your manager. Most of the time we operate in the overlap. But everyone reacts to the incentives that drive them toward rewards, and the incentives for your manager are different than those for you. These differences lead to conflict, but that isn't necessarily a bad thing. When both sides want something different, it's often possible to find a course of action that satisfies both.

This chapter introduced the idea that building a relationship with your manager is a long-term process and discussed ways to figure out what each side wants and needs. It also reminded us that everyone on the job needs to act like they know what they're doing, whether they feel confident or not. Finally, the principle that "employees advise; managers decide" was covered, which affects how you interact with all managers.

The next chapter demonstrates a quick win in the form of a simple technique you can start using right away. The idea is to provide *good-enough* answers to open-ended questions, which helps make you a responsive employee with a minimum of time and effort on your part. That also helps to build the constructive loyalty relationship you need in order to succeed.

Giving Good-Enough Answers

A real key to managing your manager is to understand your manager's position, problems, and needs, so you can think clearly about how best to help. We'll start this chapter with a situation that often arises in the business world, where habits formed in school will cause you problems. The best part is that once you understand the real issue, the solution is simple and easy and immediately improves the employee/manager relationship.

Say you are a working professional, like a software developer, actuary, lawyer, or in some other career that involves a lot of training and years of experience. You happen to be engrossed in a particular problem at work. Your manager, a nice enough person under normal circumstances but prone to asking odd, open-ended questions, sends you an email.

"Hi (your_name_here)," it reads. "AI and machine learning have been in the news a lot lately. I know you're not involved in those fields, but I was wondering about them and thought I'd ask you anyway. How do you think they will affect (our_primary_product)? Regards, (your_manager)."

(If by some chance you are in the AI or machine learning fields, try this instead: "The current media environment is breaking up. Should we increase our multimedia presence, like forming a YouTube channel or doing live demos on Twitch or TikTok?")

You read this with a mixture of irritation and despair. As a professional, you care deeply about doing your job to the best of your ability, and you are currently mired in a hard problem. The last thing you need is a distraction, especially involving a question you have no idea how to answer.

So you think about your options:

- Ignore the question, at least until you are finished with your current task.

- Write back a quick message saying "I have no idea," and get back to your real job.

- Give a partial, incomplete answer that might very well be wrong.

- Put aside your regular work and dig into it so that you can give an answer that meets your regular minimum standards of excellence.

You know you can't ignore the request indefinitely. Sooner or later your boss will come by asking about it. You hate the idea of giving a wrong answer. Diving into the problem has some appeal, because you are interested in the topic and might find it fun to learn more about it. Besides, your boss is right—these are hot subjects right now, and anything you learn about them would probably help your career in the long run. The problem is, you still have a job to do and it has deadlines you can't ignore.

So what do you do? The easiest approach is to give a "good-enough" answer, which is an answer that satisfies your boss while minimizing the disruption to your work. You want to be responsive, and you want to say something intelligent, but you don't want to waste too much time on a topic where you don't have a lot of expertise.

The technique of providing good-enough answers is a simple way to build a constructive loyalty relationship with your boss. A template for doing so is provided later in this chapter, and the best part is that you can start using this technique right away.

Providing incomplete answers that may turn out incorrect is difficult for most working professionals, however. Professionals are problem-solvers. We're trained to identify problems and fix them. A good-enough answer feels like it doesn't fix anything. Instead, it reminds us of tests we took in school for which we weren't prepared so we tried for partial credit. The challenge, therefore, involves overcoming our natural resistance to giving incomplete answers that may turn out to be wrong. The difference is that, in most cases, a good-enough answer is all your manager really needs.

If that's true, why are we so resistant to providing an answer that is only good enough? The academic analogy is important, because for many of us, the root of the problem comes from our educational system.

Winning the Game of School

In school, you are trained to provide complete, known answers to every question asked by a teacher. While there are many great teachers in the educational system, they operate within constraints that drive them to favor straightforward

answers to common questions that can be answered in a timely fashion. Teachers are frequently required to manage classrooms filled with large numbers of students, making individual attention difficult to provide. They need to cover a specified body of material in a limited amount of time. All too often, the students are evaluated by a series of tests provided by outside agencies, and performance on those tests affects the schools in many ways. The system encourages teachers to ask simple, easy-to-grade questions that allow students to progress in a measurable way from one level to the next.

(As an aside, the recent COVID-19 pandemic, with its reliance on online schooling, only made that situation worse.)

Students grow up in this system, and the skills needed to succeed under it become a habit. In school, when a teacher asks you a question, they not only have an answer in mind, they also expect to hear that answer in a particular way. This is called "showing your work," and if you're not sure about the correct answer, learning how to show your work the way the teacher wants to see it helps you get at least some credit.

The result is the "Game of School"—the strategy of figuring out what the teacher wants to hear and how they want to hear it, and providing it. That's a survival skill in an academic environment, and students who are good at it have a decided advantage over students who are not.

Ken says:
Being Good at the Game of School

Personally, I always excelled at the Game of School, which is part of the reason I have so many academic credentials I don't use. Even knowing that each question asked of me had to have a right answer that would fit into the required time helped me know what to do.

I sensed that being good at the Game of School didn't necessarily mean I learned what I needed to know, but the benefits were worth it. The implicit promise was that the same skills were going to translate into the "real" world, and while they helped, they weren't nearly enough.

Another problem with the Game of School is that it is very hard on those students who don't succeed at it. One of my good friends is the best software developer I know, and he has only a two-year academic degree. He had trouble being taken seriously by human resources departments in any major company, but everyone who knows him admires him and knows what he can do. More generally, every person in IT knows someone like that. Being good at the Game of School is certainly an asset, but it isn't everything.

Of course, the easiest way to become good at the Game of School is to actually learn the material. Then you can focus on structuring your answers in the desired way. There is an overlap between learning and being able to provide answers in the preferred style, but the skills required are different. For someone good at the Game of School, performance gets better as the semester goes on as a student figures out what the teacher wants. Those people who have trouble doing that, or who struggle to communicate in ways the teacher understands, have a much harder time.

The problem, of course, is that the academic world and the business world are different. If there's no teacher and no right answer, there's no guidance on what the answers need to look like. In some cases, a right answer may not even exist.

Winning the Game of Business

What drives questions in the business world is very different from questions asked in an academic environment. Unlike school, where teachers know the answers to the questions they ask, in business, when someone asks you a question, it's because they're stuck. They have a problem and they don't know what to do about it. Someone at work asking you a question is having trouble and thinks you might be able to help. If they already knew the answer, they wouldn't be asking for help in the first place.

Think about when you have a problem on the job. If you run into a roadblock and you know someone else in the company who might have the answer, you contact them directly. The goal isn't to assess them and their expertise, it's to get the job done. You have a task and you are encouraged to use whatever resources are available to accomplish it. If a coworker can help, great.

In fact, the way we approach problems at work is fundamentally different from that in school. Problems that require professionals to solve tend to be difficult, without immediate, easy answers. It would be great if you can provide a complete solution right away, but that's unusual. Normally you need to work on the problem over time. That might mean reading technical documentation, evaluating best practices you find online, checking out blogs or podcasts, building demos, or any of the other mechanisms available to find out not only what's right, but also what's current. As the saying goes, *today's best practices are tomorrow's maintenance problems.* It's not enough to know what's "right," the definition of right changes over time, so you need to know the current thinking, too.

In school, the quality of your answer affects how you are evaluated. Consequently, you're not supposed to use outside resources. The work is all supposed to be your own. In the business world, it's understood that you will need access to resources like books, computers, or the internet, and working together with others to get an answer is assumed.

The result of all this is that in business, when someone asks you a question, your best option is to give them some help right away, setting conditions on the accuracy of the answer, along with a promise of a more complete answer later.

Here is a simple, software-based example. In the IT world, the most popular control system for source code is Git. Git is a distributed system, generally involving both local code and code on remote servers. It's command-line based, so it doesn't require a lot of tools to use. It also has a well-earned reputation for being difficult to use and harder to understand. Most software developers know just enough about Git to perform the tasks they do every day, but if anything unusual happens, they've got a serious problem.

Say you're working on your own code, making commits both locally and remotely as you go along. You suddenly realize, to your horror, that you're going in the wrong direction. What you've done isn't going to work, and you need to undo all the changes you made in the last couple of days. That's exactly what source-code control systems are for. The problem is, while you know it's possible to undo all your changes in a proper, maintainable way, you haven't used those commands for long time.

You can try reading the documentation, and good luck with that. Like most developers, though, you probably know somebody in your organization who is good at Git. If they can help you, they can save you all kinds of time. So you send that person an email, or a Slack message, or a text, or maybe all three, and you wait for an answer.

While you're waiting, you're stuck. You can read the docs, or browse the internet for solutions, or read a book, or try to figure it out yourself, but you're hoping that your colleague will give you a good answer quickly. The longer you wait for a reply, the more frustrated you get.

This case is similar to what you find in school, in that there is a right answer. But you're not the teacher. You don't know the answer, and you're stuck until you come up with one. You're also not interested in evaluating your colleague. You just want to know what to do.

When your boss asks you a question, it's hard not to project onto that person the same teacher/student relationship you learned in school, because part of your boss's job really is to evaluate you. In reality, though, most of the time they're not doing that; they just don't have an answer either. Worse, because they're your boss, they expect you to take their questions seriously and respond as soon as you can. That's why giving a "good-enough" answer is often the right course of action, especially if you're faced with an open-ended question without an obvious technical response.

Giving Good-Enough Answers

The key to good-enough answers is the following statement:

A good-enough answer today is much, much better than a great answer next week.

This is hard for professionals to believe because they're so accustomed to giving correct answers that solve problems. A good-enough answer doesn't satisfy that criterion. Worse, it might even be wrong, and nobody wants to be wrong to their manager. But being able to quickly provide good-enough answers helps you and your career, because it not only addresses the problem and thereby removes it from your list of tasks, it also relieves the questioner's frustration of waiting for a reply.

Because you probably don't have a perfect answer available, following is a basic template you can use for your response. You reply with "I don't know, but …" and add some details:

- Here's what I do know: *(Add what you're sure about.)*
- Here's what I think: *(Speculate about the actual answer.)*
- Here's what I would do to figure it out: *(Describe the steps or resources needed for a complete answer.)*

And then add the magic question:

- Do you want me to look into it?

That last part is key. You're responding quickly, which is really important. You admitted you didn't have the full answer, but you gave the questioner some information that may allow them to make progress. You showed them where you believe the answer will go. Best of all, you gave your boss a rough cost estimate of how hard it would be to find the right answer. Rather than dropping all your current work, this reply lets your boss decide whether it's worth it to take the additional time required to find a complete solution. After all, their job is to make decisions like that.

Remember: employees advise; managers decide. Don't decide to put all your current work on hold to find a perfect answer. Give your boss the chance to make that decision.

At least nine times out of ten, the reply from the boss will be something like, "That's fine. That's all I needed."

For example, applying this to the AI question posed at the beginning of the chapter, the answer might be something like the following:

"How will modern developments in artificial intelligence affect our product? I don't know, but here's what I do know:"

(Here is where you add what you know.)

"I agree that AI and machine learning are growing in importance in the industry. They do basic pattern matching and help you see relationships you might have missed. They've made great strides in areas like computer vision and voice recognition. There's also a lot of work going on in the field, so the tools and techniques are changing on a regular basis."

(Here you put in what you think will happen in the future.)

"I believe the tools will eventually stabilize into some kind of commodity product that can be added to any system that collects data. Eventually we'll be able to download or purchase a tool, point it at the data we've collected on how our users work with our product, and let it guide them toward the answers they probably want."

(Here you list the steps you would take to find out more, giving your manager a rough cost estimate of how much work this would involve.)

"I don't think we're there yet, however, and we're not in the business of building those tools. We could, however, create a demo project that used, for example, the TensorFlow product from Google, and see how easy it would be to train it on our collected data. That would require learning more about Python programming and more about the way that tool is used, but could be done on a small project if you think it's worth it."

(Then add the magic question.)

"Do you want me to look into it?"

Adjust that answer to suit your own opinions, experiences, and biases, but the good part is you can probably assemble an answer similar to that in less than twenty minutes. The best part is that you've accomplished several good things:

1. You answered a tough question quickly, adding caveats as needed to protect yourself.

2. You demonstrated responsiveness to the boss, which is always viewed favorably. Seriously, if you ask a question of a colleague and they get back to you right away, you're thrilled if the answer is any good at all.

3. You gave a preliminary cost estimate of how much time and effort it would take to get a more thorough answer.

4. You removed the task from your attention, so now you can get back to work.

Again, in almost all cases, the boss's reply will be to thank you and move on. You don't know why the boss asked the question in the first place. Maybe they read an article about AI and it triggered some ideas. Maybe they were in a meeting and the topic was brought up by another manager, or even their own boss. Maybe a vendor is trying to sell them a product and they're wondering if it's worth the investment. In any case, you've given them some information right away, and if they need more, they'll ask for it.

The beauty of good-enough answers is that they build the constructive loyalty relationship at a minimum cost to your time and energy. Responding right away always makes the questioner happy. You either confirmed or denied their intuition, which may lead to more questions, or it may not. You also avoided putting real work on hold except when told to do so. By explicitly acknowledging the boss's power to decide how you spend your time, you've assured them that they can ask you a difficult question without interfering in your real work more than necessary.

Every once in a while the boss will tell you to go ahead and spend the extra time. But at least that way it's them making the decision and not you, so they'll have to take responsibility for the lack of progress on other tasks while you're answering their question.

What to Try: Practice Giving Good-Enough Answers
The next time your boss asks an open-ended question, try the suggested template, and do it as soon as you can. Here are a few open-ended questions you can use for practice: • What if two of our primary competitors merge? How will that affect what we do? • Are we practicing an agile development methodology? Should we? How can we go beyond whatever we've already done?

What to Try: Practice Giving Good-Enough Answers

- Do we need to open a remote office in China? India? Spain? Cameroon? (Insert country of choice.)

- How has the transition to remote work impacted our company? More to the point, if and when the current pandemic ever ends, how are we going to adjust our work environment?

Most managers are surprised and happy to get a quick answer at all, and often they'll say you don't have to go any further. Being responsive is a easy way to build the loyalty relationship and rarely incurs much additional work.

Responding right away to requests builds the constructive loyalty relationship more quickly than any other single technique. By responding, you demonstrate how seriously you take any requests coming from your boss and that you're willing to help them any way you can. It's a subtle, but unmistakable, win.

Being responsive also goes to the heart of the loyalty relationship. Your boss knows you don't have time for a complete answer and they know that you're not currently an expert in the area they asked about. The proposed answer template shows that you felt it was important to give them an answer, while making it clear that your information is currently limited, and you're giving them a basic estimate of what it would take in additional work to give a better answer.

Putting It All Together: Good-Enough Answers

Learning how to provide good-enough answers makes you a responsive employee, and demonstrating responsiveness helps to build a loyalty-based relationship. It also saves you a lot of time and effort, which is useful because you can reply without taking the time required to be perfect. That makes it a win for both parties.

The technique is simple, but sometimes hard to adopt. We all have perfectionist tendencies, and nobody ever wants to be wrong, especially at work. But by answering quickly and placing boundaries on the answer, you get a reputation for being responsive. Maybe the boss's response to your answer will be to tell you to dig into the problem. Most of the time it won't be, and you'll win on several levels: you make your boss happy by answering right away, you avoid having to give a definitive answer to a hard question, and you encourage the boss to continue to let you know what they're thinking about, which is a good source of future information.

To be clear, the good-enough answer itself isn't really the point. The real goal is to build a loyalty-based relationship with your manager that you can rely on when you need it.

In the next chapter we will delve into the world of your manager: what motivates them, what fears they live with on a regular basis, and what they look for from an employee. We'll see why managers value loyalty is so highly, and how by following certain concrete practices you can build that loyalty relationship in a way that works for both of you.

Creating Constructive Loyalty

The first chapter talked about how conflict between you and your manager is inevitable. That's not inherently bad, and it's not anybody's fault—it's part of the system because what each of you want and are rewarded for are different. That chapter also discussed what you as a working professional look for in a career: a job that provides opportunities to succeed, the resources you need to learn and grow, and enough autonomy to let you focus on your job.

You have one natural ally in your quest toward that goal: your manager. Your manager plays a vital role in your career. You need that person on your side if you have any chance of getting what you need to succeed. That's true even if—as so often happens—your manager is not very good at their job and doesn't seem to appreciate you or your abilities.

How do you make your manager your ally? Not by simply doing what they ask. That might satisfy the manager, but it only gets you part of the way to your goal, which is to ensure the manager takes your desires into account whenever they make decisions that affect you. Your goal should be to achieve a *constructive loyalty* relationship with your boss, and that term needs to be discussed in some detail.

Trust Goes Both Ways

The words "loyalty" and "trust" are both important in the context of managers and employees. Both carry strong emotional overtones, so it's important to be clear about the concepts and their differences.

As working professionals, we need to trust our managers. Managers also need to trust us. That sounds good, but what does it actually imply? What do we trust managers to do for us, and what do they trust us to do in return?

What We Need from Managers

Starting from the employee side, employees need to trust their managers to fight the organizational battles for them. Professionals are focused on the technical aspects of their job. They want to spend their time working on problems related to their expertise. They trust managers to handle the political issues, like competing for resources. Every project has to justify its budget, both in terms of accomplishments and impact on the organization. It's up to the manager to make the case for funding a project. Technical people can support that effort, and even be available when necessary to answer questions, but there are always more projects that need money than money available. Every decision about funding requires trade-offs, and most technical employees are not interested in those arguments.

Employees also need to trust managers to represent them when "political" issues arise. The nature of a hierarchical organization means that employees are normally not managers and, therefore, are at a disadvantage politically when conflicts with other managers arise. For example, if you need resources to do a job, and a different manager (one not in your chain of command) decides to make that difficult, you need an ally to help in that fight.

> **Ken says:**
> ## Managers as Political Allies
>
> I spent many years in a research division of a large company. One year, one of my primary customers in another division decided to form his own group to do that research directly, instead of funding me (and others) to do it for him. That decision had nothing to do with me or my performance. Instead it was a way of exerting more control over the area and possibly growing it into a major group in the manager's division.
>
> What I needed, and fortunately in this case had, was a manager at the same level as the division manager to act as my ally. My manager got me into the discussion room so that I could make a case for how we could work together. I had a case to make, given that I'd been in the area for many years, both as a worker and someone who helped train others. Surely that would be an asset to the division manager.
>
> Still, without that ally, the division manager could easily have ignored me. My manager also knew the details of major programs above my own, so he could negotiate much more varied options with the division manager than I could.
>
> As it turned out, I was able to make my case, and then the two managers were able to come to an arrangement that made both sides reasonably happy.

Another reason employees need to trust their manager is when problems arise. Those problems can come from mistakes or simply events outside employees' control. Either way, you need someone to vouch for you—to assure the clients that you can handle the issues and will move forward.

Finally, employees need to trust their managers to get them the resources they need to do their jobs well. That can mean capital expenditures like hardware, or subscription services like access to cloud providers or software licenses. It can also mean access to online learning platforms, expert consultants, or simply books and videos that teach you how to work in unfamiliar areas. This is often a challenge, because many managers (especially those new to their career) default to saying no to anything that involves money. More experienced managers are better able to make reasonable assessments of costs versus benefits. Either way, we feel that if our managers want us to do our jobs well, we need access to the tools that make that likely or even possible.

What Managers Need from Us

On the manager side, first and foremost managers need to trust us to do our jobs to the best of our ability. When given an assignment, we will make our best efforts to accomplish it. Jobs that require professionals are generally not trivial, so there's always a degree of risk involved, but we'll do what we can to minimize those risks.

A good trusting relationship means we'll also tell managers when problems arise. No one wants to admit that they can't do a job they've been assigned, as that could threaten the confidence managers place in us. Nobody wants to look foolish or incapable in front of the person who will be evaluating their performance. Nevertheless, it is important to admit when you've encountered problems you don't know how to solve.

Managers also need to trust us to support their decisions. As said previously, "employees advise; managers decide." It's important we support those decisions, especially publicly. You can certainly argue them (and a later chapter will discuss how to do that in some detail), but to the outside world, we're a team and we're all in this together. Managers need to know you "have their back," as the saying goes.

Both employees and managers need to trust each other in order to work together productively. That trust doesn't have to be the implicit, deep trust of a family member or other relationship. It's a professional level of trust that helps you get your job done and helps support your manager in their decisions.

Ken says:
Admitting When You're Stuck

We all build up patterns of behavior in an organization that help us get by. Unfortunately, sometimes those patterns take the form of bad habits that were adopted to cope with a particularly bad situation and then stayed with you.

I had one really good manager when I was a research scientist. One day early in our relationship, he came to me to ask if I was ready for our meeting the next day. Knowing how little I'd accomplished that week, I said no and asked for a postponement.

Once he figured out why I was trying to avoid the meeting, he insisted we meet as planned. During the meeting, he wanted to know the truth about what I'd done that week and why I hadn't accomplished more. This was very difficult for me, as I'd built up a habit of hiding how much I didn't know. Still, in response to direct questions, I admitted how stuck I was.

He pointed out that doing so enabled us to take direct action to deal with those problems early enough in the project that there were still time and resources available to re-plan. He also pointed out that a postponement of our meeting for a day or two would not have made any difference, and that postponing deadlines becomes habit-forming itself.

That meeting changed our entire relationship, and it helped build a level of trust I hadn't had with a manager for a long time.

Note that the issue of trust is more subtle in certain areas. Managers are often not free to tell us everything due to confidentiality issues or budgetary reasons, or because they are being trusted by their own managers not to reveal too much information. Sometimes as an employee, that can feel like a manager is hiding the truth or even outright lying. If you feel that's your situation, you'll need to decide whether or not the relationship is worth salvaging. Usually the best idea is to talk to your boss during one of your periodic meetings and express your concerns and see if that helps.

Also, this section is not about basic ethics. If your manager is truly dishonest, you have a bigger problem than anything discussed so far. Later chapters will talk about how to train your manager to take your needs into account, but if you can't believe what they say at all, it may simply be time to move on.

The Critical Importance of Loyalty

Constructive loyalty starts with the concept of loyalty itself. Someone is loyal if you can count on that person for support. Businesses go to great lengths

to acquire loyal customers. In relationships, loyalty is expressed as faithful-ness: keeping your promises, following through on commitments, and being supportive when difficulties arise. Loyalty is important to everyone, but it is critical to managers. You want your manager to be loyal to you, but your manager needs you to be loyal to them. When your performance is evaluated, you can point to work you did. Managers have responsibility for projects and personnel, but their influence is a lot more indirect. Success as a manager is hard to measure, so they rely on the loyalty of others more than most employees realize.

One demonstration of how much managers value loyalty occurs whenever a new, relatively high-level manager is hired. Usually the first thing that person does is bring in a handful of their own people. Is that because their own people are better than the existing employees? Almost certainly not. But their own people will be loyal. They'll stake their success to the success of the new manager. They'll "have their back," as the saying goes.

What to Watch For: A New Manager's New Hires

Watch what happens when a new manager is hired at a relatively high level. Does that person immediately bring in a handful of their own people? Are those hires fundamentally different from the people already in place?

Almost always the answer is no. Their own people will be loyal, however. They will stake their success to the new manager's suc-cess, support them when problems arise, and more.

Managers will notice if you are loyal. More to the point, they will definitely notice if you are not loyal, and that will impact your career.

When a loyalty relationship breaks down—when a manager no longer believes their employees are loyal—problems arise. One example from the movies comes from an absolute classic, *The Caine Mutiny*.

Failing to Establish Loyalty

To see what happens when loyalty isn't there between a manager and their employees, consider one of the great classic movies of the middle of the 20th century: *The Caine Mutiny*.[1] Despite the fact that it was a major hit for Columbia Pictures, most people these days haven't seen it (the fact that it's about sixty-five years old might have something to do with that), so the

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1. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0046816

following discussion summarizes several of the main points. Be aware that there are spoilers ahead, but not for everything, and it's such a good movie that it's worth seeing many times even if you know what's coming.

The lead actor in *The Caine Mutiny* is Humphrey Bogart, who plays Lt. Cmdr. Queeg. Queeg assumes command of the *USS Caine*, a tiny and rather insignificant ship in the American Navy during World War II. Queeg is not a typical Bogart character. This is not the Humphrey Bogart of *Casablanca* or *The Maltese Falcon*. Instead, Queeg is a mass of insecurities. He blames others for his mistakes, spouts clichés, gets overwhelmed by small problems, and quickly loses the support of the crew.

Ultimately the situation degenerates into a crisis when the ship encounters a typhoon. Queeg freezes and is so unable to cope that the executive officer feels compelled relieve him from command. That's the mutiny part of *The Caine Mutiny*, and while the ship is saved, the result is an inevitable court-martial of all the officers involved. The trial turns when the defense attorney puts Queeg on the stand and applies enough pressure on him that he breaks down and starts paranoid raving about conspiracies and imaginary problems in front of the court martial board. The officers are found not guilty, and you think the movie is over.

The last scene, however, is what transforms the movie into a classic. With the officers in happy celebration, in comes the defense attorney, who is drunk and angry. He claims that Queeg was a sick man and couldn't help himself, and that the officers bear responsibility as well.

"If you had given Queeg the loyalty he needed," the attorney says, "do you suppose the whole issue would have come up during the typhoon?"

That's important. The breakdown in loyalty resulted in a crisis, and during a crisis, it's too late to build the kind of loyalty relationship you need with your boss. The crisis for those of us not in the military during a time of war might be a round of layoffs, or a merger with another company, or even a positive one like an influx of capital offering new opportunities. The problem is that when the crisis is upon you, any actions you take to build a relationship with your manager appear self-serving and hard to believe. You need to establish the loyalty relationship ahead of time. That way when the crisis comes, the relationship is already there, ready to help you.

To build constructive loyalty, it helps to understand the world of your manager. When you know what pressures they deal with on a regular basis, you can structure your actions accordingly. You can't fix their problems, but in many cases, you can avoid making them any worse.

Ken says:

Why Should I Be Loyal When My Manager Isn't?

It feels unfair to ask you to be loyal when your manager isn't. If your manager makes decisions that are against your best interests, why should you reward that? Doesn't loyalty need to be earned?

Certainly, but the actual term used here is *constructive* loyalty, which is loyalty you can provide that still allows you to push back when necessary and retain your own sense of self-respect. When your manager does something you don't like, you will push back, but in a way that doesn't threaten the loyalty relationship, as described in Chapter 5, Winning the Prisoner's Dilemma, on page 49.

Remember, you're playing the long game. Building (or, if necessary, rebuilding) a constructive loyalty relationship takes time. Fortunately, the steps required—and the mistakes to avoid—are not that difficult, and unless you were already planning to leave, what else were you going to do during that time?

Your Manager Lives in Fear

It's generally not obvious to workers in the field, but your manager deals with fear all the time. How a manager handles those fears often determines how successful they are.

Two sources of fear come with any management job: encountering the *illusion of control,* and being forced to make decisions based on *inadequate information.* Two other factors affect technical people who have been promoted into management: handling the *loss of status* relative to their success as a technical person, and facing the *erosion of technical skills* that comes from changing from a technical job to a managerial one. Let's start with the issue of control, which affects everybody.

The Dream of Control

Everyone would like control over their own lives. Employment issues in general are affected by economic conditions, but the trend over the last few decades has been to magnify the uncertainty that surrounds our jobs. Many workers who in previous years would have been permanent staff are now brought in as contractors. Companies use this as a way to avoid paying benefits, and to make turnover easier. Even among the executives, no one has a job for life any more. Companies that used to provide a career track for all of its workers now consider outsourcing a viable business strategy in order to compete with the rest of the world.

While job uncertainty is stressful for any worker in the field, imagine the extra pressure it adds to the low-level managers that professionals encounter on a daily basis. High-level managers often have their positions consolidated, combining them with others in order to cut costs. Nobody is more expendable than a low-level manager. When a company decides to downsize, it often blames the decision on having too many layers of management, and it's not the top people that suffer as a result. That stuff, as they say, flows downhill.

The normal response to job insecurity is to reach for more control over your job. Many technical people enter management in the first place because they think that will give them more control. After all, what could be better than being the person making decisions about raises, promotions, and assignments? It sounds ideal.

Unfortunately, the reality is quite different. Budgetary decisions generate arguments. Once money is allocated, it's hard to change the amounts, even when business requirements evolve. If a manager needs to hire additional personnel, acquire capital equipment, or justify additional travel, everything must be evaluated in terms of the currently available dollars. It can be frustrating to explain to technical employees why they can't have the resources they insist they need, but managers must do this all the time. Most employees see only their own needs. Part of the challenge of being a manager is balancing competing requests against company needs. Power and influence also are tied to budget levels, and low-level managers have the least of everything. Yet they have to deal with complaints both from above and from below. It's hard to feel much control in a situation like that.

Managing Uncertainty

As stated earlier, one of the basic differences between working professionals and their managers is decision-making authority. Professionals advise; managers decide. While being the person who makes the decisions sounds appealing, the fact is most decisions are made without adequate information.

When technical people don't have enough information to solve a problem, they get more, either through basic research or by collecting more data. Managers often don't have that luxury. When they make plans, they are in a sense predicting the future, and "it's tough to make predictions, especially about the future" (a quote often attributed to Hall of Fame baseball player Yogi Berra).

Some people have difficulty making decisions in the best of times. If your manager is one of those people, you can assist with the process, but remember

that your job is not to make decisions for them. When offering options, remember that your boss will later be in a room trying to justify what you're telling them to do, and provide the arguments that will make them look good. If their difficulty in making decisions is part of their basic personality type (discussed in Chapter 6, Communicating More Effectively, on page 67), you can try to provide information for them in a way they are most likely to hear and understand.

What to Do: Help Defend Financial Decisions

Sooner or later, every employee needs to ask a manager for money, whether for new equipment, travel reimbursement, new or better software, or anything else. The next time that happens, try to imagine your boss being forced to defend that request in a room full of other managers. If you can provide them with the arguments they'll need to justify giving you the money, you have a much better chance of getting it.

Every manager has a certain level of budget authority that does not require additional approval, but unless your request is obviously small enough to fit under that limit, don't assume your boss can simply approve expenditures without fighting for them. Try to give them the weapons they'll need to win that battle.

Making decisions is hard enough, but when you add to it the fact that managers rarely have all the information they need to make them, they become particularly difficult.

For example, a low-level manager may need to decide whether or not to purchase a piece of software, and then choose among a range of competing vendors. If the one they select has problems, they'll face criticism from people who have to use it and from the managers who provided the money in addition to any problems the software caused, as well as any upgrade costs or training expenditures. No software is perfect, and you don't really know how it's going to work until you use it, so what do you do? You collect what information you can, pick one, and hope for the best.

Uncertainty doesn't go away as you rise through the ranks, either—the costs of each decision just become higher. A high-level manager makes decisions that potentially affect hundreds or thousands of people, as well as the future of the company as a whole. Should the company close down a current facility and move it to a less expensive area? Will that involve layoffs? What about the people unwilling or unable to relocate? It's easy to see the current problems, but it's hard to know what issues will arise at the new location. What

if the promised benefits don't materialize? Even beyond the disruption to the company and the current employees, managers themselves lose their jobs over decisions like that, and it's impossible to know for sure whether they're doing the right thing until it's already done.

> **Ken says:**
> ## Deciding with Inadequate Information
>
> A friend of mine had to make a decision about relocating an entire division. I asked how sure he was that he was doing the right thing, given that so many people's lives were going to be affected and that it could take years before the company saw any real benefits from the relocation.
>
> He described some of the steps he took to predict how the result would work out, but admitted that at some point you just have to make the decision and move on. He claimed that in any major decision, having even 75% of what you needed to know is a luxury.
>
> Making decisions based on inadequate information is a regular part of a manager's job. As employees, part of our responsibility is to try to reduce the areas of uncertainty, or at least attach cost estimates to each choice.

If you're the owner of a company, a whole new set of challenges arise. Many successful start-ups eventually have to decide whether or not to accept venture capital funding in order to scale up quickly. That inevitably means giving up an ownership stake in the company. It also means success will be measured by growth, and the temptation will be to cut corners, both legally and ethically, to show that growth. For their part, venture capitalists know that the vast majority of their investments fail—a few winners pay for the entire portfolio. Therefore, they apply increasing pressure on the owners to find out if they're going to be one of those winners or not, and if you fail, you're probably finished as a company.

There are ways to deal with inadequate information. Some managers rely on techniques from the risk management literature, which tries to help you quantify the risks of various decisions. That's a good idea, but the feeling of nervousness that accompanies making decisions when you know you don't know enough never goes away.

Loss of Influence

Most companies don't have a technical track where you can continue to get raises and promotions without accepting management responsibilities. Successful professionals eventually hit a limit of how high they can go. As they

become better at their technical jobs, they also become more aware of how badly technical problems are being handled by others. Being one of the best means you're surrounded by others who are worse, and you become painfully aware of the mistakes they are making.

When you are the technical expert and you state your opinions, that is called *influence*, as opposed to explicit authority,[2] and it's very powerful. Technical people gain influence through their expertise. Once you become a manager, however, that starts to wane. As a manager, you may have assigned authority, but the longer you are out of the technical ranks, the harder it will be to persuade technical people to do what you ask.

The other fear managers promoted from technical ranks experience is how long it will be before their technical knowledge becomes obsolete. Knowledge actually lasts a while, and the fear that you're losing your edge can be worse than the reality.

Building Constructive Loyalty

As a working professional, you can't make your manager's fears go away, because in many of the situations described earlier, you're not the source of them. However, often you can avoid making them worse. As a simple example of a useful technique, don't complain about your boss anywhere someone can hear you.

What to Avoid: Criticizing Your Manager in Public

Criticizing your job is a time-honored tradition, but criticizing the boss where anyone can hear you goes to the heart of the loyalty relationship. If your boss does something you really hate, you may feel justified in complaining about them to your coworkers at the office or after work in a social setting.

Please don't do it. You will only make your own life harder if you do. Loyalty is a fragile thing, and trashing someone in public destroys it. Even if you believe your boss will never hear about it (and don't count on that), when you express such feelings out loud, it changes how you feel and affects how you interact with your boss.

As a corollary, don't trash your own manager on social media, either. That may sound obvious, and for the current generation

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2. https://charity.wtf/2018/08/17/on-engineers-and-influence

What to Avoid: Criticizing Your Manager in Public

of workers it probably is, but today's younger generation is growing up on social media and has a tendency to share everything about their lives there. As kids grow up, they learn what not to say out loud, but it's always tempting to vent about the latest injustice at work.

Resist the temptation. Tell your spouse, tell your pets, tell your therapist if your relationship with your boss drives you to one, but don't tell the world. The momentary relief you might feel will have long-term negative consequences for you. It isn't worth it.

This extends to public sites like Glassdoor,[3] where you can leave reviews of your company anonymously. More specifically, feel free to review your company, the compensation package, or even the work environment. Just don't say anything, even indirectly, about your boss. It's not just that anonymity on the Internet can be broken. Simply the act of complaining "out loud" changes how you feel, and makes it that much harder to rebuild the relationship. If you are so unhappy at the office that you feel compelled to vent in public, it may be time to consider moving on. By complaining where someone might hear it and identify you, you're making it more likely you'll have to find another position anyway.

When you build a relationship with your boss, you provide the support the manager needs. As a result, your boss wants to keep you around, happy, and productive. Successful managers quickly learn that their success is dependent upon the people who work for them.

Assuming your technical skills are not an issue, managers value people who will:

- Tell them the truth, but in a way that does not embarrass them.

- Support their decisions in public, both to other employees and other managers.

- Argue for one option or another, but once a decision is made, will do their best to carry it out.

- Respond to requests as quickly as possible, and take them seriously even if they seem ridiculous.

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3. http://glassdoor.com

- Let them know when problems arise, preferably in time to do something about them.

- Complete assigned tasks on time.

That last point requires some clarification as well. In order to complete tasks on time, you need to be able to estimate how long they will take. For routine tasks, that's easy, but you don't hire a professional to do only routine tasks. For anything else, it's hard to figure out how long tasks will take, and most professionals have a tendency to underestimate the time frame for difficult tasks. If you can develop the skill of knowing how much to promise in a given time frame and then deliver on that promise, you become a very valuable employee.

In return, you can expect that your manager will:

- Fight organizational battles for you.
- Support you when problems arise.
- Do their best to get you the resources you need.
- Help you in your career.

All of these factors play into the constructive loyalty relationship. In the rest of this book, we'll focus on building loyalty from your side of the relationship and reveal some simple ways to train your boss to give you what you need in return.

> **Ken says:**
> ## Positive vs. Negative Advice
>
> Some advice I'll share is positive, like giving decent answers quickly in Chapter 2, Giving Good-Enough Answers, on page 15. Other times, I'll tell you what to avoid, like the trap of criticizing your boss in public. Either way, I want to help you build a constructive loyalty relationship with your manager. A "constructive" loyalty relationship is one you can live with as well. You need to be able to push back when your manager's decisions hurt you, but privately, so you preserve that loyalty relationship, which we'll talk more about in Chapter 5, Winning the Prisoner's Dilemma, on page 49.

Putting It All Together: Constructive Loyalty

Don't think you have to blindly follow your manager's directives. For the loyalty relationship to be constructive, you need to follow certain principles that let you keep your own integrity, while still allowing you to push back when

necessary. What does it take to build that constructive loyalty relationship with your boss? In upcoming chapters you will learn:

- How to be responsive without causing you too much additional work.

- How to assure your boss that you will support them when needed, while still being able to argue if necessary.

- How to protect yourself from decisions that go against you.

- How to communicate with your boss is a way most likely to be heard and understood.

Everyone knows the impact managerial decisions have on us. By recognizing the impact your actions have on them as well, you can make the relationship better and avoid doing unnecessary damage. If you do the hard work now to build that relationship, when a crisis comes, the boss will be there for you when you need them.

The next chapter presents the two fundamental messages you want to give your boss, expressed colloquially as "I got this," and "I got your back." The goal will be to keep those messages in mind whenever you communicate with your manager, because both directly impact the constructive loyalty relationship.

Sending the Important Two Messages

As your relationship with your manager improves (hopefully by following the advice given in this book), new temptations arise that can cause trouble for you in the long term. This chapter, and the related Chapter 8, Your Boss Is Not Your Friend, on page 99, discuss the traps that come from sharing too much or too little about yourself with your manager.

To build a professional relationship with your manager, you want to send two messages to your boss, which can be expressed in colloquial terms as:

- I got this.
- I got your back.

Each takes some explanation and some examples. The idea, as always, is to give you a framework in which to think about what your actions and your words communicate to your supervisor. The lesson here is whenever you interact with your manager, think about how that interaction communicates each of those two messages.

I Got This: Taking Responsibility

Many years ago, I watched a comedian tell a story about taking responsibility. He woke up one morning and was told by his wife to go downstairs and make breakfast for their children. He didn't want to do it, so he immediately started raising objections that made him seem completely helpless.

"Where are the pans?" he asked. "Do we have any pans?"

She insisted everything was in the kitchen and forced him to move. When the children showed up and saw him making breakfast, they naturally asked for items they weren't supposed to have, like chocolate cake. He thought about it and gave them what they wanted. Each step in the process followed that

pattern, to the point where the children were singing his praises and violating every morning rule the family had.

This lasted until his wife entered the kitchen, saw what was going on, and had a fit. She yelled at him and then, as the comedian tells it, "sent me back to my room, which is where I wanted to be in the first place!"

(Some readers may remember this routine, which is from the Bill Cosby performance, "Himself," which he performed in 1983. We have since learned a lot more about Mr. Cosby. In a small way, this story is consistent with what we later learned about his ethical issues.)

It's a funny story, and it demonstrates exactly what this section is about, though it does so by doing the exact opposite. When your boss gives you a job to do, what they're really asking is for you to take responsibility for it. Taking responsibility doesn't mean you know everything. It means that you'll figure out what you don't know, and ask for help when you need it.

What to Watch: Housework and Responsibility

Household chores are a good way to illustrate the concept of taking responsibility. If one partner or the other hates a particular household job, like washing clothes or doing the dishes, that partner may ask for detailed, specific instructions on how to do it and do the wrong thing anyway. While this tactic might work in the short run (in the sense that the partner avoids having to do the job), in the long run, this is a rookie error that inevitably leads to arguments and hurt feelings.

On the job, that's not a message you want to communicate to your boss.

When your manager gives you an assignment, it's easy to assume they expect you to know how to carry it out. That may be true, within limits. The thing is, if the job requires a professional (like you), then chances are it's not a simple job—and the techniques necessary to do it likely evolve over time. (In the IT world, we express that by saying that today's best practices are tomorrow's maintenance problems.)

Part of being a professional is tackling the hard problems in your industry on a regular basis. That always involves uncertainty and anxiety. Nobody likes to feel like they don't know what they're doing, and they certainly don't want to be judged by others when they're struggling to figure out how to solve a problem. Even more, nobody wants their boss to see that that they don't know what to do or how to do it.

Handling uncertainty and anxiety is part of becoming a professional in the first place. But the details of how you do it are up to you. You may prefer to stick to areas where you know all the answers, and can therefore do common tasks quickly and efficiently. You may get bored with problems you understand and constantly seek out those you don't. The relevant question, though, is how much of your inner turmoil do you show to your boss?

That depends on the relationship and the individuals involved, but the key is that you want your boss to know that whatever happens, you'll figure it out. You want to communicate the message, "I got this."

In practice, that means two things:

- You promise that you'll take responsibility for the problem, handling the parts you know and finding ways to solve the parts you don't.

- You promise to let the boss know when you need their help, preferably early enough in the process to re-plan if necessary.

Any decent manager knows when they've given you a hard problem to solve. If they don't, that's something to bring up in your next periodic meeting. Good managers also understand that you're going to struggle with hard problems. They don't expect miracles. They just want to know that you will dig in, do your best, analyze the problem, and let them know when to intervene.

As you gain more experience and expertise in your chosen field, you'll be better able to make these judgments. You'll know more of both what the problems need and what you can and cannot do.

Many employees think the message they need to send is that they can handle all problems assigned to them. Experts, however, are keenly aware of the limitations of what they know, and often discount their own expertise. You don't want to tell your boss that you can solve every problem in your field immediately. What you want them to hear is that you will do your best, learn whatever you need to learn, find ways to handle what you don't know, and take responsibility for the overall process. In other words, *you got this.*

When your manager believes that, they relax. They find it much easier to trust you, and they're more willing to give you the freedom and independence necessary to find creative solutions to problems.

What Not to Do: Under Promise and Over Deliver

You've probably heard the phrase, "under promise and over deliver." The idea is to avoid committing to goals you aren't sure you can achieve, and then produce more than expected. That approach sometimes conflicts with the "I got this" message, because it comes across to your manager as refusing to agree to work on anything beyond simple problems. Of course, you don't want to promise the world, either.

Under promise and over deliver is great when you're dealing with customers. You limit what you're obligated to do, and you then "go the extra mile," to use another common phrase.

When dealing with your manager, however, keep in mind that you are building a long-term professional relationship. The "I got this" message avoids thinking in terms of metrics and is more focused on building trust. Taking responsibility builds trust, even when you are unable to deliver a particular task successfully. Good managers will build a buffer into the schedule anyway, as a way to manage risks and uncertainty. When you meet with your manager during the process, your estimates of time and effort will improve, which will also lower both the risks and the uncertainty.

I Got Your Back: We're a Team

For a variety of good reasons, many workers in the IT field have a low opinion of their managers (see Chapter 1, Making Inevitable Conflict Productive, on page 1 and Chapter 3, Creating Constructive Loyalty, on page 25 for details). When you are working for someone whose technical abilities you don't respect, and something technical goes wrong with the project, it's tempting to blame the manager. "If they'd only followed my advice," you might say, "we wouldn't have had these problems."

By contrast, if the project goes well, it's also tempting to keep all the praise for yourself. After all, you're the person who actually did the work. Maybe your manager listened to you, but they should be doing that anyway because you're the technical expert. Even more, the boss couldn't have done the job without you, so why should they get the credit?

That is a very short-sighted view of the world. Consider another movie analogy, this time from a comedy, but not a classic by any reasonable definition: *Private*

Benjamin.[1] (Note: spoilers ahead, but because this movie is not a great one, perhaps you won't mind as much.)

This movie came out during a transitional period in Goldie Hawn's career, as she went from roles in which she played helpless characters, wandering around in a fog and needing to be rescued (for example, see *Foul Play*[2]), to strong female leads (like in *Wildcats*[3] or *The First Wives Club*[4]). In *Private Benjamin,* she starts off helpless, but grows into a much more interesting character. In the beginning of the movie, a series of unlikely problems undercut her self-confidence, at which point she winds up enlisting in the army (again, it's a comedy).

Once there, she encounters her manager, Captain Lewis, played by Eileen Brennan. Captain Lewis immediately recognizes Benjamin for the disaster she is, and their relationship starts off badly. Everything deteriorates until she gets a chance to leave, at which point she realizes this may be her only chance to take control of her own life. She decides to stay, patches up relations with the rest of her squad, and learns how to do her job well.

Unfortunately, her boss doesn't recognize her progress at all. When the squad is ordered to participate in an exercise similar to the game of capture the flag, Benjamin and her friends ask the captain for their assignment.

"You four guard the swamp," they are told. The message being that the captain wants them out of the way, where they can't cause any trouble, and if it's unpleasant for them, so much the better. It's that kind of relationship.

Of course, it's a Goldie Hawn movie. They get lost, stumble across the enemy encampment, take them all by surprise, capture the flag, and triumphantly return to their team headquarters. The captain sees the enemy approaching in force and doesn't realize who is in control, so she radios for permission to surrender. A colonel who is watching the entire operation contacts Benjamin, and asks if she accepts the surrender. "No," she says, "we're part of the same team."

The colonel then berates the captain. "Don't be so quick to give up," he says, and goes to praise Benjamin and her team.

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1. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0081375
2. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0077578/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1
3. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0092214/?ref_=nm_flmg_act_18
4. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0116313/?ref_=nm_flmg_act_11

This is a B-movie at best, but that scene contained a magic moment. This was Benjamin's chance to repair the relationship with her boss. All she had to say was:

"Thanks, but we were operating under radio silence, so the captain had no idea we were coming. She sent us on detached duty, and that put us in a position to succeed. She was in command, so she deserves credit, too."

Everyone, including the colonel and certainly the captain, would know who really did the work. But by backing up her captain, by "having her back," as it were, the entire relationship would change. That one statement—defending her manager to the manager's manager—would go a long way toward repairing the relationship.

In the movie, she just says thanks and takes all the credit for the success, and everything goes downhill from there. The implied message to her boss is, I succeeded in spite of you, not because of you, and if that meant you got criticized, that's just too bad.

It's hard to make a bigger blunder than that. Outside the movies, it is very, very difficult to succeed in a hierarchical organization without the active, willing support of your manager, and undercutting them to their own manager is going to cause major problems for you.

In fact, keep in mind that *part of your job is to make your boss look good to their boss.*

Violate this at your peril. The message you want to send to your boss is that you "have their back." Your boss needs to know you will support them to the rest of the organization, especially when problems arise.

Remember that your boss lives in fear. If you make it clear to them that you will defend them against any outside challenges, that will go a long way toward building the constructive loyalty relationship.

Note that it is not necessary to lie in order to do this. All you have to do is recognize that all actions taken by anyone in the team are done as part of the team. For example, say you are on a project that fails badly. Your boss's boss comes to see you, saying they have already talked to your boss, and now they want to talk to all the manager's direct reports and find out their perspective on what went wrong. During this process, think about what your manager is going through at that moment. Your boss is likely in their office, terrified. They know the project was a disaster, and they know their boss is talking to the rest of the team members, and they have no idea what you're going to say.

When you reply to the manager's manager, feel free to criticize the budget, the equipment, the software, the schedule, any third-party resources, or anything else unrelated to your boss. When the topic of your boss comes up, stick with the word "we."

"We decided to try this approach. It didn't work, so we had a meeting and then we decided to try this other approach, but that didn't work, either."

That is all true. Your boss made the decisions about what to do, but you are part of a team, and you are acknowledging that fact. Your boss's boss is also a manager and will know what you are doing. Like any manager, they value loyalty to a great degree, and will see that you are going out of your way to be loyal. That has a lot of value to you, especially if your boss's boss doesn't know you well. Now they will see that you are willing to defend your boss even when something went wrong, and that's a powerful message to send.

What Not to Do: Throw Your Manager Under the Bus

When you are asked by your boss's boss to assess your own boss, answer in a way that implies all decisions were made by the team rather than one individual. Use the word "we" to describe all tasks, whether they were done by a single person or not.

The boss's boss will recognize what you are doing and likely value it. If your boss really is the source of all the project difficulties, don't worry that the boss's boss will miss that. That person knows who had the responsibility and made the decisions. In reality, the boss's boss isn't evaluating your boss during that conversation; they're evaluating you. If they see you being loyal, that tells them how seriously you take the relationship. If you throw your own manager "under the bus," they'll know they can't trust you to be loyal to them, either.

If you are in a project that fails and you really believe the failure was your manager's fault, it can be tempting to say so to the manager's manager. Try to avoid doing so anyway. If you're concerned that if you don't say anything, the manager's manager will not find out, take consolation in the facts that:

- It won't happen. Somebody on the team will say something, or it will be obvious from evaluating the results that your manager's decisions caused the disaster.

- The manager's manager knows who made the decisions. Sure, you're being loyal and that's a good thing, but the manager had the authority and therefore bears the bulk of the responsibility.

- If it does happen, that should be your worst problem. Think about it from the point of view of your manager's manager: if everyone on the team was loyal and backed up the manager, then they did everything they could to succeed. The problem had to come from the manager.

The "I got your back" message applies whenever you are dealing with anyone other than your direct manager. Remember that managers value loyalty more than most people expect. Working professionals have a lot of pride and often an ego to match. When a manager finds an employee who is willing to share both credit and blame for everything that happens and defend the boss to outside criticism, they are pleasantly surprised. That is the sort of employee they want to keep around and keep happy.

What the "I got your back" message does not mean is that you will never argue with your manager. Every relationship evolves to an equilibrium, and different people can handle different levels of conflict. Because conflict with your manager is inevitable (because you want different things), sooner or later you will have to deal with unpleasant decisions. The next chapter is all about how to push back against decisions you don't like. But to the outside world—and that includes your manager's manager—you're a team and everything is fine.

Putting It All Together: The Two Messages

Every interaction with your manager sends a message, whether you want it to or not. Therefore, it's in your best interest to plan what messages you want to send. By communicating "I got this," you assure your manager that you will take responsibility for any task assigned to you, and you will do your best to carry it out. Even if you are ultimately unsuccessful, the act of taking responsibility makes a powerful statement. It builds trust in you and in your relationship.

The "I got your back" message communicates that you understand that you are part of a team and will remain loyal to your manager even when problems arise. Because loyalty is so highly valued by managers, by defending them you become a valuable employee and someone to keep around and as happy as possible. Successful managers know that in order for them to succeed, they have to surround themselves with loyal people who can get the job done. Both the "I got this" and the "I got your back" messages communicate that to your manager. Whenever you interact with your manager, keep those two messages in mind. Evaluate your options in terms of how they will impact those two messages.

The word "constructive" in the term "constructive loyalty" acknowledges that not every interaction with your manager will be productive. Sooner or later your manager will make a decision you don't like. The next chapter presents a strategy for how to push back against those decisions in a way that will not threaten the loyalty relationship, and instead help ensure that your manager will keep your interests in mind when making decisions.

Winning the Prisoner's Dilemma

One of the themes of this book is that conflict with your boss is inevitable because your priorities and their priorities are not exactly the same. You may agree with your manager's decisions most of the time, but at some point your boss is going to make a decision that affects you that you disagree with. That action may be intentional or accidental, but either way it will hurt, especially if it forces you to carry out a task you feel is fundamentally wrong.

The question is, what can you do about it? Most employees feel they have little choice. Any time employees come into conflict with their managers, usually they think that all they can do is either:

- go along with the decision, or
- leave the group or even the company.

Unfortunately, those are extreme positions. The former communicates to your boss that nothing is wrong, while the latter means the situation has reached a crisis from which there is no return. In the long run, neither gets you what you want, which is to build up the loyalty relationship to the point where you get what you need when you need it.

Incidentally, neither of those options gets bosses what they want, either. An employee that just goes along with every decision, never complaining about anything, is hardly ideal. That's an employee who has not bought into the goals or vision of the company. That employee is likely to be someone who just goes through the motions, doing whatever they need to in order to get by. That's the opposite of the definition of a professional. Therefore, it's not only in your best interest, but also in the boss's as well, for you to be able to "push back" in a productive manner that does not threaten the constructive loyalty relationship.

The goal of this chapter is to give you a process to try when your manager does something you don't like. It won't work in all cases—nothing works in all cases—but it will give you an intermediate strategy you can employ that won't provoke a crisis. Plus, sometimes it works and results in a more productive employee/manager relationship.

The strategy is based on a successful approach to possibly the most famous problem in mathematical game theory: the prisoner's dilemma. More specifically, the strategy comes from the iterated prisoner's dilemma, where the conflict occurs repeatedly and which will be discussed in detail in this chapter.

First, a bit of context.

A Frustrating, but Typical, Situation

Imagine a situation in which your boss takes credit for your work.

I have a friend who works for a town government in my home state of Connecticut. One day she got an idea on how to simplify a particular process to make it more efficient. If it worked, the results would save the town a lot of money. So not only would she do her job and do it well, she also would get the satisfaction of accomplishing a goal beyond the normal expectations. She went to her boss and asked for authorization to do the project and for the budget needed to make it happen. He agreed, and off she went.

Long story short, the project was a success. Life got easier for many state residents and the town budget benefited.

She then went back to her boss and said she'd like to go to the next town council meeting and present the results. She was surprised when he replied, "Oh, I already did that." In other words, he took credit for all her work. He had already gone to a recent town council meeting and presented the whole project as his own, and didn't even bother to tell her about it.

Her initial reaction was the same one any of us would have, which was to get angry. "If that's how I'm going to be treated," she told me, "I'm never giving this idiot a good idea again. Why should I do my best when I'm going to be taken advantage of?"

The reaction is understandable, but ultimately self-defeating. Most nonmanagement workers don't realize that at higher levels, what the boss did in this case would be considered normal, or at least typical. Managers frequently take credit for the work of their subordinates, which they partly justify by the idea that when their subordinates get promoted, they will then get the chance to reap the benefits of *their* subordinates. Taking credit for an underling's

work is even considered motivating for that reason. This is a problem to nonmanagerial professionals, however, because getting into middle management isn't necessarily their current goal. They're never going to get that chance for that deferred reward. Even worse for working professionals, they know the manager couldn't have done the work at all without them. That makes the fact that the manager took credit particularly galling.

The problem is, if your response to this situation is to refuse to cooperate in the future, then that is as good as leaving. Even if you don't leave, a hostile response is likely to provoke a retaliatory reaction from your boss. After all, aren't you planning to continue to do your job? Aren't you already receiving compensation for it? Why aren't you willing to help the company? Are you really going to put your own personal glory ahead of the responsibilities you accepted when you joined?

No matter how you answer those questions, you look bad, and you've done damage to the loyalty relationship without getting anything in return. The boss also looks bad by being in this dispute in the first place, which doesn't help either.

Fortunately, there is a way out, or at least an approach to try, which is based on the iterated prisoner's dilemma.

What to Try: Solve the "Stolen Credit" Problem

Before this problem is addressed in the context of the prisoner's dilemma, try to think of ways you might approach it. Would you complain? If so, to whom? Would you stay quiet? Would you leave? What other options might you have?

The Iterated Prisoner's Dilemma

The prisoner's dilemma falls into a category of games known as "non-zero-sum" games, meaning games that, when played correctly, allow both sides to be successful. In a zero-sum game, one side has to lose for the other to win, and when problems are cast in that light, rarely is there a face-saving solution available. In non-zero-sum games, a much wider variety of outcomes can occur. Because you and your boss have different but overlapping goals, you can frequently find a way for both sides to get what they want, which is the very definition of a non-zero-sum game.

The basic prisoner's dilemma in game theory is described as follows:

Two people are accused of the same crime and are interrogated separately. They are not allowed to communicate with each other in any way. When they

are interrogated, either prisoner can choose to "cooperate" with the other, meaning they will stay silent, or "defect" and turn in their accomplice.

The problem is usually defined using those terms, but before any possible strategies are discussed, let's re-frame the problem, keeping in mind that you don't want the relationship between you and your boss to be a hostile one. Rather than thinking in terms of "cooperate" or "defect," consider defining the behavior in terms like "go along" versus "push back" behavior. The goal is to restore more balance to the relationship, rather than win any particular battle.

To say it another way, when your boss does something you don't like, you can either go along with it, or you can push back against it. Because the overall goal is to build a relationship with your boss that you can rely on later, those terms fit an approach that favors cooperation and is not unnecessarily confrontational.

In the original prisoner's dilemma game, the rules are: if one side cooperates and the other defects, the defector goes free and the cooperator serves three years. If both sides cooperate with each other and stay silent, they each serve a year. If both sides defect and inform on the other, they each serve two years.

The results are summarized in the following table, where the terms in parentheses are the original terms from game theory:

	B Stays Silent (Cooperates)	B Informs on A (Defects)
A Stays Silent (Cooperates)	Each serves 1 year	A serves 3 years B goes free
A Informs on B (Defects)	A goes free B serves 3 years	Each serves 2 years

Note that the actual numbers are not important, but certain inequalities between them are, which will be discussed later. Again, the terms will be reinterpreted later in the context of the employee/manager relationship.

If this game is only played once, the best strategy can be determined by minimizing each person's losses given whatever choice the other makes. If A and B are never going to interact with each other again, the following will show that each should defect, because that gives them the best result regardless of what the other does.

Take prisoner A, for example:

• If B cooperates, A should defect because then A goes free.

- If B defects, A should also defect because that reduces the prison sentence for A from three years to two.

Therefore, A should defect because that yields the best result regardless of what B does. Because the situation is symmetrical, the same analysis applies to B, and therefore, B should do the same (defect). The sad result is that by trying to minimize their losses, both sides hurt themselves.

From the perspective of the employee/manager relationship, this situation doesn't really apply because it assumes each side is only going to interact with the other a single time. The problem becomes much more interesting—and more relevant for us—when the game is repeated over and over. This variant is known as the *iterated* prisoner's dilemma (IPD).

The strategies to solve the iterated prisoner's dilemma are famously described in the 1984 book, *The Evolution of Cooperation [Axe09]* by Robert Axelrod, which is based on a paper he co-wrote in 1981. The book has been through several editions (the link provided is to the revised edition from 2009) and is considered a classic in its field.

In the book, Axelrod describes a computer tournament he organized around the iterated prisoner's dilemma. He solicited programs from a variety of sources and had each program play the other programs 200 times. Each program coded in a strategy for how to respond, given that all they knew were the previous moves in the game.

The tournament was won by a tiny program (four lines of BASIC, believe it or not) called Tit for Tat (TFT).

The Tit-for-Tat Solution

The TFT strategy consisted of the following:

- Cooperate on the first move.
- Echo your opponent's move each time thereafter.

So if the opponent cooperates on any given move, TFT cooperates on the next one. If the opponent defects, so does TFT, but if the opponent then changes back to cooperating, TFT immediately returns to cooperating as well. The program never defects first, retaliates immediately, and also forgives immediately.

After the tournament, Axelrod released all of the programs to the participants and stated that he planned to hold another tournament soon. TFT would be included in the new tournament, and additional programs were also going to be solicited from economists, mathematicians, social scientists, and more.

The challenge was to find a strategy that would win the new tournament, even knowing the success of TFT.

Believe it or not, in the new tournament, TFT won again. You can show mathematically (as Axelrod does in later editions of his book), that TFT is a *stable* solution to the iterated prisoner's dilemma. That means that once you have a number of players employing it, it's hard to get them to do anything else.

What to Try: A Free, Online IPD Simulator

A good way to get a feel for how the iterated prisoner's dilemma works in practice is to experiment with one of the many iterated prisoner's dilemma simulators available on the web. One of the best is located at https://ncase.me/trust, which allows you to try out several predefined strategies and see how they perform against each other. You can also modify the game to change the reward level, temptation level, or any of the other numbers.

The simulator is both animated and includes music (which you can mute, in case you're planning to try it out at the office), as well as some background information on the prisoner's dilemma problem and the broader issues of establishing trust in relationships.

Try out at least the first sections. The simulator later gets into evolutionary strategies, where a certain number of losers in the population in one round are replaced by winners in the next, so you can see the longer-term behavior of each approach.

One practical lesson from the TFT solution to the iterated prisoner's dilemma is that cooperation can emerge even in highly competitive situations, as long as both sides remember they're going to do this again, and again, and again.

In fact, it's the iterative nature of the iterated prisoner's dilemma that gives rise to stable solutions. A key aspect of the prisoner's dilemma is that the prisoners are unable to communicate with each other. In the iterative version, each can use the history of previous decisions to figure out what the other person is doing. That indirect communication is what makes all the difference. Therefore, it's important to understand what message you are sending by either cooperating or defecting.

In fact, *this is the key observation*: neither always cooperating nor always defecting will get you what you want, but the combination employed by the TFT strategy can be successful in a long-term relationship. From the employee/manager perspective, it's a predictable, easily diagnosed combination of "going along" and "pushing back" that proves the most effective. You're not

trying to "defeat" your boss, who happens to be the person who has the most influence over your career. Nor are you just accepting every decision blindly, which doesn't give your boss any reason to take your priorities into account. A balanced approach gives the best results by training your boss over time to anticipate your reactions when they make decisions that affect you.

The next section gets into the details, but before that, here are some more examples of the iterated prisoner's dilemma and TFT solution appearing in actual practice.

One of the most well-known and motivating demonstrations of the TFT approach from history (and described in some detail in Axelrod's book) is the so-called Christmas Truce[1] that occurred during World War I. During the war, the disparity between offensive and defensive weaponry was at an all-time high. Armies tried cavalry charges directly into mortar fire, with the results about what you'd expect. Conflict along the Western front degenerated into a stagnant form of trench warfare that persisted month after month in one of the most miserable existences imaginable.

According to many reports, on Christmas Day in 1914, the guns on both sides fell silent. Soldiers emerged from their trenches, met in the middle, embraced, and even played games together. Eventually both sides returned to their respective trenches and the war resumed the next day.

All of that happened despite direct orders from the generals on each side prohibiting it. Cooperation emerged naturally, without explicit coordination, along many independent sections of the front among soldiers whose mission was to kill each other.

In the context of the TFT solution to the iterated prisoner's dilemma problem, how could a friendly truce like that emerge? Axelrod speculates that it probably all started with re-supplies of food. One side or the other saw the enemy receiving food shipments. During that time, they deliberately and obviously decided not to fire in the hope that the enemy would notice and do the same.

Note how this matches the requirements of the TFT strategy. Without overt communication other than watching the decisions each made in previous iterations, both sides avoided a confrontation so that each could benefit. If either side had fired, however, the other one would have done the same, and both knew it.

In places where this approach worked, it grew over time. A story about a German military officer giving a tour to a newcomer to the front is also

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1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas_truce

included in Axelrod's book. During the tour, the veteran pointed to a partially destroyed building and said, "In about twenty minutes, that building is going to be hit by mortar fire, so we need to leave the area." In other words, the conflict had degenerated to the point that both sides knew what was going to be destroyed and when, which allowed each side to report progress without actually putting anyone in danger. The end result was a kind of phony war in which both sides reported losses of material with limited casualties. In principle, this could have continued indefinitely.

One of the great benefits of the TFT strategy is that it is easily diagnosable. Each side figures out what the other side is doing based entirely on previous behavior. The situation requires each side to interact frequently with the other, even though they can't speak directly. In the World War I example, the same soldiers faced the same enemy over an extended period of time. Given those conditions, all that was required was an initial, visible move by one side toward the other that could be reciprocated.

Other real world examples aren't hard to find, but sometimes the resulting cooperation isn't a good thing. A more recent example is the hiring ban that occurred between several Silicon Valley companies in the early 2000s that resulted in a government antitrust trial and eventual settlement between Apple, Google, Adobe, Intel, and other companies.[2] In that case, cooperation reached a level that constituted collusion. Note that while the result was an implicit agreement among the players, each avoided any direct communication to that effect to avoid legal liability.

A cooperative relationship between you and your manager is a goal worth pursuing, however, so it's time to get back to that.

Applying TFT to the Employee/Manager Relationship

Bringing this back to the conflict that began this chapter between my friend and the manager who took credit for her work, how can you apply the TFT solution to this problem? Remember that the basic principles behind the TFT approach are to go along when possible and push back when necessary, echoing the opponent's response each time. The added wrinkle in the employee/manager relationship is that you want to preserve the loyalty relationship. Over time, the goal is to train your boss to anticipate your reactions, thereby training them to take what you want into account when making decisions that affect you.

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2.   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/High-Tech_Employee_Antitrust_Litigation

The first step is to start with empathy. Try to understand why the manager does what they do in light of their agenda and their fears. When the boss does something against you, the vast majority of times it's not really against you, it's *for* them. They're following their incentives, which unfortunately don't always align with yours.

Note that while empathizing with your manager means understanding their behavior, it does not necessarily mean approving of it. In any negotiation, the better you understand what drives the other person, the better you are able to judge how to behave in a way that gets you what you want.

In my friend's case, in which her boss took all the credit for her work, the boss was concerned with how he and his department were being viewed by the town council. The manager not only needed a win, but also needed to be seen as successful by the other members of the local government. Therefore, it's not surprising the manager grabbed credit for any accomplishments made by the team.

Again, this behavior is not unusual among managers. It's even considered normal, and may be encouraged within the organization. The result, unfortunately, is that if the employee is then unhappy, the manager may be surprised to hear it. Inexperienced managers may not realize what went wrong, but even experienced ones will probably consider their own behavior justified.

If this happens to you, don't be surprised, but you still have a right to be unhappy about it. Someone did take advantage of you. It's how you respond to it that is the key.

What to Try: Calmly Push Back

The practice of taking credit for employees' accomplishments is so common your manager may not expect you to be unhappy about it. Even so, you are completely justified in being upset. Just don't react based on emotion.

Discuss the situation privately to avoid hurting the relationship. Acknowledge that their actions were understandable, but point out that you should benefit as well.

Then get back to work. The key is to make it clear that while you are not happy, this is not a crisis. You'll continue to do your job. But if they take advantage of you again, they're going to hear about it again, too.

If you do what the manager—and the company—want you to do, you may grumble a bit, but then get back to work. That's stressful and annoying, and delays a probable confrontation that is likely to get worse over time. Worse, from the TFT perspective, always going along won't help at all. A manager who realizes you're always going to do whatever you're told is going to be tempted to take advantage of you again and again whenever a conflict arises. An unscrupulous manager may even rely on your acquiescence and do whatever extracts the most value from you without any additional compensation. That's no way to train your manager to treat you better.

Instead, you can try the TFT strategy, as applied via the "go along" and "push back" reactions. The steps of the TFT approach are:

1. Begin by going along with the manager's decisions.

2. When your manager does something you don't like, tell your manager about it (push back).

3. Negotiate some kind of resolution, which may or may not be successful. Regardless of the outcome, go back to work.

In my friend's case, her initial reaction was to never give her boss a good idea again. After all, if that's how she's going to be treated, why let herself be taken advantage of again? The problem is, the result is likely to be that your boss will "push back" as well, and now you have a real problem. In the iterated prisoner's dilemma literature, the "all defect" strategy, where both sides always push back against the other, is also a stable solution to the problem. Once you're stuck there, it's hard to do anything else, and you'll probably have to leave.

Instead, what my friend actually did was to go to the manager's office the next day, *shut the door* (that's important), and then said something similar to "I'm not happy."

While there are exceptions, most people don't like conflict. While every relationship builds toward an equilibrium that establishes how much conflict each participant is willing to tolerate, generally people try to minimize direct confrontations. If a manager is sitting in their office and an employee comes in, shuts the door, and says "I'm not happy," the employee almost certainly gets the manager's attention. This is especially true if that employee just did something great that the manager received praise for as evidence that they (and their team) were doing good work. The manager wants that to continue. Chances are, the manager will immediately ask what's wrong.

In my friend's case, she said words similar to, "I understand that you had ultimate responsibility for this project, and that you gave me the support to let me get it done. I'm glad you got to show it off. But I deserve some kind of reward, too."

If your manager has any experience or awareness at all, their reaction will be something like, "You're right. What do you want?"

That's when you negotiate. Maybe you want a bonus, or time off, or an award, or something else appropriate to your organization that is within the boss's power to grant. In my friend's case, what she really wanted was the freedom to choose from several upcoming projects along with the budget to do them without interference. The manager agreed, but even if he hadn't, the next step is to let it go and get back to work. As it turned out, in my friend's case, the next time she had an accomplishment worth bragging about, her boss took her along to the town council meeting.

Before continuing, note that part of the strategy is to push back on decisions you don't like as soon as possible. That's important and requires a bit more explanation.

Pushing Back Right Away

While the TFT strategy recommends you start out by cooperating, the fact that your agenda differs from your manager's in important ways (as described in Chapter 3, Creating Constructive Loyalty, on page 25) means some conflict is inevitable. Sooner or later, your boss will make a decision you don't like. In that case, to stay true to the TFT strategy, you need to push back. When you do, remember three important aspects of the process: (1) you need to make it clear you are not happy; (2) you need to push back right away so the manager connects their decision with your reaction; and (3) you need to make it clear you intend to continue to do your job as best you can whether you receive some sort of accommodation or not.

My friend went to her boss the next day and explained her dissatisfaction with the situation. However, she was careful to do so in a way that did not threaten the loyalty relationship. She shut the door, because to the outside world, everything was fine. A public confrontation would only escalate the situation, and she was already one step away from leaving. But the boss needed to know she wasn't happy and what actions precipitated the problem. Pushing back right away helped establish that connection.

Immediate push back is a key feature of the TFT strategy. If the employee waits six weeks, letting their anger stew, they are likely to blow up at the next

perceived injustice, even if it's unrelated to the current issue. By objecting right away, the goal is to connect the reaction to what the manager did, so they will come to expect that when they do something the employee doesn't like, they're going to hear about it.

Another side benefit of pushing back right away is that it addresses the situation before it becomes a crisis. It lowers the intensity of the conflict so that hopefully it can be resolved amicably before both sides have a chance to dig in.

It's all too easy to imagine a situation where the boss does something you don't like and your reaction is colored by all the accumulated injustices that have happened over the past weeks or months. Then your angry reaction, which may actually feel restrained on your part, comes across as out of proportion to the current problem. In a situation like that, the manager is going to object. They may even push back as well, saying something like, "If you were so upset at the time, why didn't you say anything?"

That's both a fair question and a really uncomfortable one, but it also distracts from the lesson you're trying to impart. You want them to know that if they do something you don't like, they should expect you to push back.

The TFT strategy, and indeed the iterated prisoner's dilemma itself, says nothing about the seriousness of the conflict. In the example in this chapter, a manager took credit for an employee's work. That can be serious or not, depending on the situation. Other typical conflicts can be worse, such as being overlooked for a promotion, not receiving a project you really want to do, or being asked to cover for a mistake made by the manager. Conflicts are inevitable when people have different goals and incentives. The idea of the TFT strategy is to push back in a reasonable way that doesn't threaten the basic loyalty relationship and to do so in a timely manner so that the manager connects your response with their actions, and then to get back to work so the manager knows this isn't necessarily a career-threatening crisis.

The balancing act is figuring out how much push back to do for each action. Some actions you can object to right away, making light of it, as long as the manager understands what happened. Others are so serious that you'll need time before having a civilized discussion. In those cases, by all means wait until you calm down. Just don't wait so long that it's not obvious to the manager why you're upset.

The manager has to know that you're going to go back to work, though, regardless of the outcome. That will be true all the way until it isn't, when it's finally time to abandon the relationship.

Managers Who Refuse to Learn

You may be thinking, "I pushed back and tried to negotiate, but what if my manager doesn't fix the problem? What if they won't apologize, or even acknowledge they did anything wrong?"

That doesn't matter, at least as far as the process is concerned. You go back to work. You pushed back and made your case, but then you went back to doing your job to the best of your ability. That's critical, because it demonstrates that you can object, and even have a serious disagreement with the boss, without having to leave. When the boss doesn't give you a good result and you continue to do your job, you demonstrate to your boss that even though you're not happy, you understand your responsibilities to them and the company. It's a dose of perspective, and actually makes resolving conflicts easier.

What if, even after your objections, the manager does something against you again? The TFT solution says you push back again, negotiate, and then go back to work once more. That can be frustrating, but at least you get to preserve your own sense of self-respect by making the objection. Not only that, by standing up for yourself, you are demonstrating that your concerns are valid and you're doing your best to help yourself. Even with uncooperative managers, you can take some comfort in that. Of course, the long-term hope is that your manager will recognize what is going on and change their behavior.

One of the key aspects of the TFT strategy is that it's easy to diagnose. You may not feel like you're getting anywhere with any individual objection, but you are training your manager over time. Most managers don't like conflict, especially with productive employees. Eventually they'll either learn to take your reactions into account, or they won't. How long to wait depends on the situation, the incentives, you and your manager's tolerance for conflict, and how badly your manager needs you. Pushing back each time, however, makes your voice heard and even anticipated. It's certainly better than doing nothing, and if you eventually feel that you have to leave, the manager shouldn't be surprised.

That's important. If you do eventually decide you've had enough and it's time to leave, the decision should not come as a surprise to your manager. They should know that you were repeatedly unhappy and that they had multiple opportunities to correct the problems. You never want to hear, "If you were so unhappy, why didn't you say something?" from the manager. Assuming

it's an honest statement, that means the situation might have been addressed, but the opportunity to do so was missed.

There's always the chance, of course, that a manager won't change their behavior. They either won't care enough about your feelings or won't be willing to accommodate what you want, or they may not even be capable of modifying their own behavior. So be it. That's when you should consider leaving, with the knowledge that you tried to fix things. At least you went through a process to try to make it work. When it comes time to leave, the fact that you pushed back repeatedly means you can point to evidence that you were unhappy and that the manager did nothing to make it better.

The process of pushing back against the boss is uncomfortable for both sides. Nobody likes to provoke the boss, especially given that you are the more vulnerable party in the relationship. The goal is to push back in a calm, rational manner, in a way that gets your point across without threatening the overall relationship. That's hard. What most people need, therefore, is practice.

What to Try: Practice the Conversation

Confronting your boss, even when the stakes are low, can be stressful. Therefore, it's worth practicing, and that's what friends are for.

Arrange with a friend to take turns being the boss in a situation that requires the other person to push back. Keep in mind that the goal is to preserve the loyalty relationship, but still express your dissatisfaction in a way that ensures you are heard. Find ways to say how you are unhappy, negotiate, and then let it go. Sometimes the negotiations should work, and sometimes they shouldn't, but let it go afterward either way. Take turns doing this.

Possible scenarios might include: being overlooked for a promotion or plum assignment, not receiving sufficient credit as part of a team effort, lack of responsiveness by the manager to email or other communications, having to train your own replacement, or any other possibility you can imagine.

Because confrontations are hard, every once in a while inject some humor. Escalate to lightsaber duels or chair races. Agree to compensation in the billions of dollars or controlling interest in the company. Anything to keep things light.

When pushing back against the boss, be sure to listen to what they have to say. This is a good opportunity to use reflective listening (as discussed in Reflective

Listening, on page 127) and open-ended questions as a way to tease out the real reasons for their decisions. Look for where your incentives and those of the manager conflict. That will give you better insight into their decision-making process, making it easier to predict how they will act in the future.

A degree of tactical empathy can be useful as well. Remember that most managers (especially the low-level managers professionals tend to encounter) are not terribly good at their jobs, either through inexperience or lack of training or support. They're just doing their best, and they are likely to make mistakes. If your conversation provides a diplomatic way out of difficulties, they're likely to take it. That's the ideal—you want your manager uncomfortable enough to realize they have to listen to you, but not so threatened that they become defensive and refuse to yield anything.

It's a balancing act, and it may not work right away, but keep in mind you're playing the long game. What you are really trying to affect is not the current decision, but rather the future decisions. You are teaching your manager how you want to be treated, and that takes time and patience. If it works, over time you'll build a much more comfortable, professional relationship with your manager. If not, at least you tried your best to fix things before giving notice that you're leaving.

Evolutionary IPD

If you look at the literature on the iterated prisoner's dilemma, studies focus not as much on individual conflicts as on how a population of competitors evolves over time. From the employee/manager point of view, that's like looking at a group of employees and managers and seeing how the interactions change as people learn how to work together. This book focuses on the individual employee/manager relationship, but it can be interesting to see how the collection of employees and managers changes behavior over time.

Two of the major conclusions from those studies are:

- It is hard to escape the "all defect" situation, where no one cooperates with anyone else, once it has been established. A single cooperator, using the TFT strategy discussed in this chapter, can't make much progress by themselves.

- On the other hand, a small group of cooperators eventually drives out those who won't cooperate with them.

Introducing a handful of cooperators into a group of defectors can, over time, change the entire culture. This is a reason why, when a new high-level

Ken says:

When "All Defect" Is the Rule

I spent a few years in a company where the "all defect" strategy had taken hold. Nobody trusted anybody, and everyone always looked out for their own gain at the expense of everyone else. This partly came about because the company changed the compensation model in a way that pit everyone against each other, with a percentage of people on the bottom losing their jobs each year.

The environment was brutal, and no amount of off-site meetings or team-building exercises could fix it. What eventually broke the pattern was a change at the top. A new high-level manager was hired, and that person brought several of their own people. Everyone learned that they had to cooperate with that group to be successful.

manager is hired, often the first step that person takes is to bring in a handful of their own people. That establishes a group of coworkers who will cooperate by default, and others who want to be successful will need to join them. It's one of the few ways a culture in a business can fundamentally change.

This emphasizes the importance of having allies in an organization. You can't change the default behavior of an organization by yourself, but a small group of cooperators can make a big difference.

Applying that to companies, the cooperative relationships that change the culture are more among managers than between managers and working professionals. In most companies, workers in the trenches already get along reasonably well, or at least better than managers do. Workers are all trying to solve technical problems in their own specialty, and their priorities and incentives don't normally conflict. They're usually willing to help each other, and if not, the reason is usually due to time-constraints or other project responsibilities. Managers, on the other hand, often find themselves competing for the same resources, which changes the dynamic. In fact, one of the surprises technical people find when they're promoted into management is that it is now harder to work with their peers.

Still, it always helps to have an ally. In many hierarchical organizations, an ally at the managerial level takes the form of a mentor. A mentor gives you perspective on how and why things happen in a company they way they do. A mentor can also give career advice, which has greater value because the advice comes from someone not directly affected by your career path. A good mentor is a great asset. If you find one, enjoy it, because just as good managers are rare, great mentors are not easy to find, either.

As valuable as allies are, however, the key relationship to focus on is the one between you and your manager. Everything flows from that. If you can train the boss to keep you in mind whenever they make decisions, you've gone a long way toward establishing a professional working relationship that allows you to get what you need when you need it.

Putting It All Together: Building the Relationship

No relationship is perfect, and the fact that your goals and incentives are different from those of the company—and therefore, your boss—means that conflict is inevitable. All too often when a conflict arises between a person and their manager, employees feel their only possible responses are to either swallow their objections or leave the company. Viewing the conflict as an example of the iterated prisoner's dilemma gives you a strategy you can use to train your manager to take your reactions into account when making decisions.

Specifically, the Tit for Tat solution to the iterated prisoner's dilemma starts with cooperation—in other words, going along with what the boss asks you to do. But when your manager does something that hurts you, you need to push back in a way that doesn't threaten the loyalty relationship. Raise your objections, negotiate, and then let it go, regardless of whether you received a satisfactory resolution or not. Make sure your boss understands that when they make a decision that negatively impacts you, they're going to hear about it, but that then you'll go back to work afterward. Even if that doesn't change you manager's behavior, you'll at least have the satisfaction of expressing how you feel. If similar situations keep coming up and the manager doesn't change, then you'll know it may be time to leave.

Another benefit to objecting right away is that you catch problems before they become crises. You're demonstrating to your manager that even though you're going to protest, you will stay loyal and are still willing to do whatever they decide. Ultimately your manager will either treat you better, taking your reactions into account, or they won't. If they refuse to cooperate over time, you will have enough evidence that when you decide to leave, both you and your boss will understand why.

The hope, however, is that your boss will learn enough about your goals and preferences to at least give you a decent explanation when they make a decision you don't like. If you know the boss is considering what you want, even when they feel they can't give it to you, you've established a healthy relationship that you can rely on whenever a real crisis comes.

All models are wrong, but some are useful.

➤ *George E. P. Box, British Statistician*

Communicating More Effectively

Communicating with anyone can be a challenge, but communicating with your boss requires special attention. Everyone wants to be heard and understood, but when you're trying to explain what you need to someone who has authority over you, it's particularly important to structure how you communicate in a way that fits your boss's natural style. If you can identify how your boss prefers to communicate, you can usually make simple changes to adapt to it. This chapter analyzes communication choices through the lens of personality-typing systems. The goal is not to investigate personality types in detail, but rather to use them to understand how to communicate effectively with your manager.

To accomplish this, this chapter presents two common systems used to assess personality type: the rather infamous Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), and the Keirsey Temperament Sorter (KTS). Of the two, the KTS approach is more directly helpful, but is easiest to learn in the context of the MBTI.

To say the MBTI is controversial is an understatement. It was one of the first personality-typing systems be adopted by popular culture, and while it has some successes and its supporters point to a decent list of publications in peer-reviewed literature, many people deride it as questionable at best. A lot of the problems, though, come from applying MBTI too broadly, or making personnel decisions based on personality types. While the MBTI has its flaws, parts of it are quite useful. It's also easy to learn and apply, and leads naturally to the KTS approach that better fits this chapter's goals.

No money is being solicited here. There is an organization that certifies MBTI tests, trains people to deliver them, and charges people to take those tests. None of that is required. In fact, the basic principles of the MBTI laid out in this chapter are enough to make a difference in how you talk to your boss. And because you've already paid for this book, you're all set.

The Big Five

If you are really interested in personality-typing systems, the system with the strongest theoretical foundation among the psychology community is the Big Five,[1] also known as the five-factor model, which identifies five broad personality types.

This isn't a book on personality typing, however. Instead, the recommendations here are about how to use the MBTI and the KTS models to improve how you communicate with your manager.

The Four Scales

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator tries to determine a person's default *preferences*. The word "preference" is chosen deliberately. People are far too complex to be reduced to a small set of behavioral rules, and we all act differently at work than we do at home. Any MBTI type can act any way they need to, given the proper circumstances. A preference defines how a person will act when there are no pressures driving them in any particular direction. A preference is about how a person behaves when they're home on a lazy Sunday afternoon with no obligations or influences making them act in a certain way.

Given that, the MBTI breaks down behavior along four scales:

- Extraversion (E) versus Introversion (I)
- Sensing (S) versus Intuition (N)
- Thinking (T) versus Feeling (F)
- Judging (J) versus Perceiving (P)

Like most topics in psychology (or any technical field, really), the words don't necessarily mean what they sound like they mean. This section will break down each scale, beginning with the most familiar: extraversion versus introversion.

Extraversion versus Introversion

Extraversion is not about how lively or open a person is, and introverts can be active in public forums. Rather, this scale describes whether a person gains or loses energy based on having people around. A strong extravert is energized by people, while people make introverts tired.

Say you and a friend attend a conference or some other similar, day-long activity. You both interact with people all day, listening, talking, and potentially

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1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_Five_personality_traits

arguing about topics related to your field. You may even have meals and breaks together.

At the end of the day, if your friend is an extravert, your friend will say, "Where are we going for happy hour?"

If you're an introvert, you'll reply (at least internally), "Anywhere I can be alone. I have to get away from all these people!"

Extraverts are energized by the presence of other people. An extravert will be "wired" or full of energy after being around people all day, while a lack of interpersonal contact can be wearing. Introverts, by contrast, need to muster their own energy in order to interact with other people, even in friendly situations. Introverts need time to prepare for interpersonal interactions, and are happiest by themselves.

What to Watch For: The Open Door Policy

How do you know if your manager is an extravert (E) or an introvert (I)? Here is a simple test, which is not definitive but might give you a clue about your manager's preference. Every manager claims to have an "open door" policy, meaning they want to hear any questions or concerns you might have. But if the manager's office has a physical door, do they tend to leave it open or closed?

Obviously, if a meeting is going on, or they're on the phone, or having any kind of discussion that requires privacy, the door will be closed. But if nothing special is happening, and the environment is sufficiently quiet to get work done, do they leave the door ajar or not?

Extraverts want to feel connected to the world around them. They'll leave the door open if possible. That way they are aware of what is going on in the outside world.

Introverts, on the other hand, shut the door.

Note that like all scales, individual people may fall somewhere in the middle rather than at either extreme. Still, knowing the tendencies of people can be useful when deciding how to communicate with them.

Introverts appreciate having time to prepare themselves for interpersonal interactions, even if it's just a few moments. Extraverts look for opportunities to talk to someone directly. Likewise, an extraverted manager will want to call a meeting to resolve any issue, which gets everyone together to talk.

Introverts prefer to set up a wiki, with the goal of avoiding any interpersonal contact entirely. Again, that is an exaggeration. Most people do not fall on one extreme or another, but the extreme cases help define the difference in preferences and are intended to make the actual situations easier to diagnose.

What to Try: How Do You Ask a Question?

You can get a sense of whether someone is introverted or extraverted by watching how that person responds when you need to ask them a question. Say you need to talk to your boss about a particular problem, and you decide to send them a message by whatever asynchronous mechanism your company prefers, whether it be email, text, a Slack message, or another way that doesn't involve actual face-to-face contact.

If your boss is an extravert, they'll respond with something like, "The next time you see me in my office with the door open, just come on in."

An introvert, by contrast, will appreciate the brief notice (or even warning) that an interaction is coming. "Give me five minutes," they might reply, "and then come see me."

Once you know which style your boss prefers, you can use that information in the future.

Understanding the introvert/extravert scale helps you know how to approach your boss, but it doesn't tell you how to structure your communications with them. The next scale, sensing versus intuition, goes to the heart of that question.

Sensing versus Intuition

The sensing versus intuition scale is about how people acquire new knowledge. A person with a strong sensing preference prefers to learn step by step, adding facts one at a time, and only after accumulating a sizeable number will they then want to step back and look at the big picture. A strong intuitive, by contrast, doesn't have the patience for learning individual steps unless they already know where the process is going.

Sensors prefer concrete, measurable progress. Intuitives live on pattern recognition. Sensors build a mountain of facts and concepts. Intuitives see patterns everywhere.

As an example, in the IT world, the JavaScript programming language is used to build front-end applications that run inside browsers, among other things.

One of the defining features of the JavaScript world during the past few years has been the rise of new JavaScript MVC (model-view-controller) frameworks. It's a very active area, with many solutions available and new ones being developed all the time. Keeping up can be quite a challenge.

If you go to a conference and learn about a new framework that promises to simplify your future development tasks, you probably want to try it out on your current project. A major change like that requires your manager's approval, and that is a communications challenge.

If your boss is a strong sensor, you don't go into their office and offer to talk about software development from Charles Babbage and Ada Lovelace on down. You don't even try to discuss the current wild, chaotic world of JavaScript MVC frameworks, contrasting Angular with React with Vue.js, among others. Instead you go in with the discussion framed around the individual steps needed to convert from your existing system to the one you want to try. You can say something like, "You know how our existing system uses Backbone? That's getting pretty dated and there's been a lot of progress since then. If we follow these simple steps we can upgrade it to the latest version of Vue.js, which will have these other advantages as well."

After showing the steps, the result will likely be, "Very interesting. But why this framework?"

Now you can have the big picture discussion. The key is to lay out the steps first, so the sensor sees what's involved, before you go to the pattern matching.

By contrast, if your boss is a strong intuitive, you don't go in talking about individual steps. An intuitive brushes that aside, saying something like, "Why do you want to do this? What makes this one superior? Why should we change at all?"

So instead you explain the big picture. The response is then likely to be, "Okay, I see. Now how do we get there?" at which point you can present the individual steps.

Notice that you're making the exact same arguments in both cases. You're just making them in the opposite order.

When Types Interact

Extraverts and introverts know that the other types exist, though they may not understand them. Sensors and intuitives, however, often have a problem when they mix. When a sensor describes an intuitive, they may complain about them being dreamers, or always building "castles in the sky," or worst

of all from their point of view, someone who misses steps. When intuitives criticize sensors, they use terms like plodder, or unimaginative, or complain that "I thought we were supposed to be working on disruptive game changers here" or similar statements. It's important to recognize that both sides are wrong when they do that. People with both preferences do both big-picture pattern matching and small-scale detailed work. They just prefer to do them in the opposite order from each other.

What to Watch For: Where Do They Focus?

How do you know if your boss is a sensor (S) or an intuitive (N)? Watch what they focus on when they have to learn something new. Does your boss start by looking at big-picture items, like how this new area compares with existing ones? That's the mark of an intuitive. Do they instead focus on the details, preferring to see the steps before they make any evaluations? Strong sensors prefer that approach.

Again, it's possible your boss isn't an extreme case. Your boss may fit somewhere in the middle. That's fine, and good information to know.

One way sensors and intuitives run into trouble with each other is when one asks the other how they reached a conclusion. Specifically, the worst question an extreme sensor can ask an extreme intuitive is, "How did you get that?" That's because the worst answer the intuitive can give is the truth.

For example, say a manager is a strong sensor and an employee is a strong intuitive. When the sensor boss gives the intuitive employee an assignment, they're likely to give a lot of detailed instructions, sometimes without the big-picture context, and expect the intuitive to follow all the steps in the order presented.

For their part, the intuitive is likely to have problems with that. They'll encounter unexpected difficulties, or simply miss steps that were either explicitly or implicitly intended but not stated. Eventually, if the intuitive does reach the goal, there is still a communication challenge to overcome.

After the intuitive reports success, the sensor is likely to ask, "How did you get that?"

The worst possible answer from the intuitive would be an accurate recounting of the actual process. "Well, I tried what you suggested, but I couldn't get it to work, so I tried this related approach. That didn't work either, but it reminded me about this other option that looked very similar, so I tried that.

That gave me enough insight that I was able to throw everything away and mix it with a completely alternative approach and come up with this."

That is a completely useless answer to the sensor. Worse, the sensor's response would be to dig in and try to find out which step in their instructions had gone wrong, which the intuitive would feel is completely beside the point.

Understanding the Other Type's Perspective

The key is to understand that when any sensor says, "How do you get that?" what they are actually asking is not "how did you get that," but rather, "how would I get that?" They don't really care about your thought process. This isn't school, where how you come up with an answer is often at least as important as the answer itself (see the chapter on Chapter 2, Giving Good-Enough Answers, on page 15). They want to know how they would get the same answer the intuitive reached.

Once you realize this, if you are an intuitive, whenever your boss asks you how you got an answer, you can formulate your answer accordingly. Come up with any interconnected series of steps that lead from where the sensor started to where the intuitive finished—whether they were used or not—and describe them.

At worst the sensor will ask, "Did you really do that?"

You can comfortably reply, "No." The sensor might roll their eyes, but they don't really care. They may feel the normal sensor obligation to show you how if you had just followed their steps as originally described you might have gotten there just as easily, but you can live with that. They may never quite understand the intuitive's need to explore and see the big picture, but as long as you come up with an approach they can follow, it won't matter much.

What to Try: Answer The Way They Prefer

If your boss is a sensor and you're an intuitive, the next time they ask you how you did something, give them the steps they need to hear first and see if that's enough. If you're a sensor and they're an intuitive, show them a pattern that fits what they expect to see, without filling in the details.

You may find that a short, simple answer, phrased the way they need to hear it, will get them to leave you alone much more quickly.

Keep in mind that both sensors and intuitives do the same things. They both care about patterns and similarities to other situations. They both care about

getting the steps in a process right. They just operate in opposite order. That means you can adapt to their preferences temporarily—when talking to them, do things their way just long enough to get to the parts you actually care about. That saves you the grief you would get at the beginning of a conversation that's not presented the way they think.

Thinking versus Feeling

This scale is about making decisions. A person with a strong thinking preference prefers logic and facts, while a person with a strong feeling preference needs a "gut feel" that something is correct in order to make a decision.

Imagine a person with a thinking preference as having an actual balance scale in their head. If one side of the scale is lower than the other, obviously that must be the right decision. Anything else, they might say, is irrational.

Note the value judgment inherent in the word "irrational." Thinking versus feeling is another scale of the MBTI where the two sides not only don't appreciate each other, they may not even imagine the other side exists.

People with a thinking preference want data to back up their decisions. That's usually a good thing, but sometimes what they optimize on is the wrong data point.

By contrast, a person with a strong feeling preference needs to experience all sides, even if that experience is virtual or simulated. When faced with a collection of facts, they may still be uncomfortable, especially if the decision is in an area where they lack experience.

This can lead to problems for managers. Managers with a strong "feeling" preference may appear to be indecisive, especially when faced only with data. "Thinking" managers know what they have and act on it. Feeling managers want to "see" both sides in action before they are comfortable deciding between them.

What to Try: Facts versus Demos

Say you are the front-end developer as described in the previous section. You want to use a new JavaScript framework for your next project. If your manager has a strong thinking preference, lead with a white paper, or some written comparison of the available options that shows your preferred framework winning.

Don't approach a feeling manager with a collection of facts. For them, provide some sort of demonstration. In the case of front-end

What to Try: Facts versus Demos

frameworks, send the manager to the TodoMVC website,[2] which demonstrates how to implement a "to do" list application using a wide variety of available frameworks. Better yet, take the manager there yourself and walk them through it. That way you can filter the information to focus on your primary options, and let the manager play with them later. The goal is to provide some sort of experience for the manager so that they can "feel" how each option works.

Judging versus Perceiving

If the thinking versus feeling scale involves *how* people make decisions, the judging versus perceiving scale measures *when* they prefer to make decisions. A person with a strong judging preference prefers to finish existing tasks, while a person with a strong perceiving preference enjoys starting new tasks. Unfortunately, the words "judging" and "perceiving" do not imply the associated behaviors at all, so this is the scale where the words used are the furthest from what they mean. They do, however, provide unique letters (J and P) for the overall template, which is useful at least.

A judging manager is all about completing tasks. If a new project comes up, a judging manager immediately thinks about all the existing projects and considers how they can be completed before taking on new work. All managers consider outstanding work when new projects come up, but with a strong judging manager, that is their first and dominant thought. A person with a strong judging preference is uncomfortable having many tasks undone.

By contrast, a perceiving manager loves to start new projects. For them, starting anything new is fun, especially because at the beginning of a new project you can often make a lot of progress right away before you encounter the really hard parts. When a new project comes up, a perceiving manager sees this as an opportunity ("a chance to do it right at last"), and often responds with, "Don't worry about the money right now; if it's worthwhile, we'll find a way to do it."

The judging versus perceiving scale feels different from the others, and does not appear in most other personality-typing systems. It seems to be measuring something interesting, though, and its real value lies in combining it with other scales. That mathematician wasn't only a J (judging preference); he was

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2.   http://todomvc.com

What to Watch For: The Empty Desk

One sign of a strong preference on the judging/perceiving scale is to notice whether your manager's desk is clean or not. A strong "J" prefers a clean desk, while a strong "P" has piles stacked on every available flat surface. A similar clue is how many browser tabs that person has open at any given moment.

I have a friend who is a mathematician whose desk is always spotless. I asked him about it once, and he said, "When I'm working on something, I take it out. When I'm done with it, I put it away and take out something else." He said that like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

also an S (sensing preference), and the two-letter SJ combination is important. The next section, dealing with the Keirsey Temperament Sorter, goes into details on why the given two-letter combinations are actually the most important in understanding how your manager thinks and adjusting your behavior (and theirs) for the best outcomes.

If you want to learn more, Wikipedia provides a good source of information on the MBTI.[3]

As a last note, the book, *Do What You Are [TB18]* by Tieger, Barron, and Tieger is a well-written guide to job hunting based on a self-assessment of personality type. While any person can do anything, and being a different type from the people around you can actually be an advantage, operating against type over time can be stressful. When you're deciding on a career path, it can be helpful to know what jobs tend to be associated with your type.

While the MBTI is interesting, for our purposes, the Keirsey Temperament Sorter is more directly useful, partly because it prioritizes the two-letter combinations that illustrate a person's dominant characteristics, and partly because it avoids a lot of the hype (both good and bad) associated with the MBTI. The next section describes how the KTS works and how to apply it to your own situation.

The Keirsey Temperament Sorter

The Keirsey Temperament Sorter is a self-assessed personality questionnaire introduced by psychologist David M. Keirsey in his book, *Please Understand Me [KB84]*. It's not formally associated with the MBTI and differs from it in

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3.   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myers%E2%80%93Briggs_Type_Indicator

significant ways. Still, knowing something about the MBTI makes it easy to learn the categories of the KTS.

The KTS defines four "temperaments": Guardians, Rationals, Idealists, and Artisans. These types have their own definitions, discussed as follows, but they are easy to understand using the MBTI letters already covered. Each will be discussed in turn, but to summarize, Guardians combine strong sensing and judging preferences (SJ), Rationals are strong intuitives with a thinking preference (NT), Idealists test highly on the intuitive and feeling scales (NF), and Artisans are associated with sensing and perceiving preferences (SP). The definitions are shown in the following table.

Guardians (SJ)	Rationals (NT)
Artisans (SP)	Idealists (NF)

The KTS Wikipedia page[4] breaks down these high levels into more fine-grained subtypes that involve all four scales from the MBTI. For our purposes, however, we don't need that level of detail. If you can assess your manager as a Guardian, a Rational, an Idealist, or an Artisan, you know enough to communicate effectively with them.

Again, this is just a model and should not be treated as a perfect description of reality. However, it has some useful aspects that can help you understand how to communicate with your manager. Feel free to accept only the parts that help you in your career.

The Stability of Guardians (SJ)

The KTS Guardian type matches up with the letters S and J in the MBTI. Guardians combine a sensing preference with a judging preference, which means they learn incrementally and they finish what they start.

Guardians are the backbone of hierarchical organizations. They move step by step, they finish what they start, and they don't rock the boat. Guardians who are good at their jobs tend to get promoted steadily because they show steady progress on time and under budget. Eventually, Guardian managers may reach a ceiling on promotions because at some point, further success depends on making more radical changes to the organization, and whether

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4. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keirsey_Temperament_Sorter

an individual Guardian can become comfortable with that goes well beyond their Myers-Briggs type.

Guardian managers like to break down projects into small, easily digestible chunks that can be completed with measurable metrics. Because this is a big part of any manager's job regardless of type, many managers tend to be Guardians.

What to Watch For: Checklists

One way to know if you're working for a Guardian is to notice how much they like checklists (in other words, a bulleted list of tasks to accomplish). A strong Guardian loves checklists and forms them at any opportunity.

When dealing with a Guardian with a checklist, know this: you can't argue a Guardian out of a checklist. Don't even try. It will only make both of you angry, especially if you are not a Guardian yourself. Instead, find a way to let the Guardian check off your task even if a particular task is not done exactly as intended.

Say a manager receives a new directive from the human resources department that all the manager's direct reports need to complete a new form and submit it back to human resources. A Guardian manager likely adds that to their list of to-do items for that day and sends the form along to all their employees.

A typical email from the manager might read, "Please complete the following form and submit it to human resources by the end of the week."

When you receive that form, you're not likely to be happy about it, partly because of the interruption and partly because of the contents of the form. You're no doubt currently immersed in a project that's requiring all of your focus. Below that in priority are all of the tasks you really need to do as soon as possible. Below that are the tasks you'd like to get to when you get some time. Somewhere below the floor is the new form.

Still, it came from your manager, so you look at it. To your dismay, some of the questions are ambiguous or uncertain. You have no idea what to put for question 4, for example; you're not sure whether question 9 even applies to you, and question 12 is a complete mystery. The temptation is to put it aside and deal with it later.

That's exactly the opposite of what you should do. Instead, set a timer for no more than twenty minutes. Fill out the form. Leave answers blank if you don't know what to do, or make something up. After all, this isn't some legal document to be used in court; it's just a form from HR.

Here's the key: submit it to human resources when you're finished.

After the deadline, your manager will come to visit.

"I really need you to complete that form," your boss might say.

"I took care of that the first day and sent it in," you reply.

That's key. Listen to what you just said. You just told your manager that you did something they knew you didn't want to do, but because they asked you to do it, you took care of it right away. That's an awesome demonstration of constructive loyalty.

"Really? Great! What did you put for question 4?"

"Oh, I left that one blank."

"I don't think you can do that. Are you sure that's acceptable?"

"I don't know. Do you want me to get the form back?"

Not a chance. Never going to happen. At that point, you're asking an SJ to uncheck a checkbox, which goes against everything they believe in.

If the next day the form comes back from human resources with a message that says you need to complete question 4, repeat the process, but this time with a ten-minute timer. Fill out what they want, in whatever way costs you the minimum time and effort, but make sure you submit it again. Rinse and repeat as necessary. This is a classic example of passive aggression winning in the end. Don't try to argue a Guardian out of a check-list—just find a way to let them check you off of it.

Rationals (NT) and Systems Thinking

In the KTS, Rationals correlate with the NT letters of the MBTI, which means they combine intuition with a strong thinking preference. They see the big picture and make decisions based on logical arguments.

Rationals think in terms of systems. In the IT world, these are your architects. In most businesses, Rationals are attracted to "systems" and process improvement jobs. They tend to think about how to optimize processes to make them more efficient and effective for everyone.

Consider that message from human resources discussed in the last section: human resources tells a manager to get all of their direct reports to fill out a new form and submit it. A Guardian manager sends it to everyone and probably adds a note to their own schedule to follow up later to make sure

it's completed. A Rational manager's first thought would be to design a system that would allow everyone to complete the form in an optimal, efficient manner.

Rationals are pragmatic, but don't tend to favor subjective or emotional arguments. While they supposedly make up only a small portion of the general population, the fact they are drawn to science and technology means that if you're in one of those fields, you'll likely encounter a lot of Rationals.

What to Watch For: Systems Thinking

When a new task comes up, does your manager immediately think about optimizing the time and effort everyone will need to accomplish it? If so, that person is likely a Rational. Rationals think about optimizing processes first, ahead of other considerations.

When making an argument to a Rational, try to emphasize the process-improvement aspects. If you can show how what you want to do makes life more efficient for everybody, you'll have an appealing argument.

Idealists (NF) and People

Idealists match up with the NF letters in the MBTI, which means they combine an intuitive (N) preference for seeing the big picture with a feeling (F) preference when it comes to decision-making. They value harmony and cooperation, and are always looking for a deep sense of meaning in whatever they do.

An Idealist manager is acutely aware of interpersonal conflicts within a team, and takes steps to address them. While Guardian and Rational managers are more focused on the tasks at hand, an Idealist manager first thinks in terms of the individuals involved in performing them.

That message sent by human resources telling the manager to get all their direct reports to fill out a new form? That request will cause an Idealist manager to wonder, who messed up? What happened that caused human resources to put this form together as some sort of protection (cover yourself, as it were) for the company?

The difficulty when dealing with an Idealist is that they want to feel inspired by whatever they're working on, and if they aren't, they have a hard time staying motivated. A Guardian has a job to do and does it. A Rational likes designing and optimizing the systems that make up the job. An Idealist has to feel that what they're doing matters, either for themselves or for others, or they're not interested.

Because they are so focused on harmony and cooperation, Idealists tend to avoid conflict. Keep that in mind when you push back against decisions you

don't like (as explained in Chapter 5, Winning the Prisoner's Dilemma, on page 49). It doesn't take a lot of conflict to get their attention.

What to Do: Just Ask

Typical Idealists, with their emphasis on interpersonal relationships, are the type most likely to find the topics in this chapter interesting. If you want to know if your manager is an Idealist, just ask. They may already know, and if not, the resulting discussion will likely tell you everything you need to know anyway.

Artisans (SP) Live in the Moment

Artisans, who correlate with the sensing (S) and perceiving (P) letters of the MBTI, combine a step-by-step approach to tasks with a preference for starting new projects. This manifests as people who like to live in the moment. They tend to be optimistic about the future and cynical about the past. They value spontaneity and trust their own impulses. They like to see what they're doing as playing rather than working. They also prefer to be active and avoid sedentary forms of learning.

All of these features mean they don't enjoy the corporate world, with its emphasis on structure and planning and long, involved reports. You're not likely to meet too many Artisans in business. One exception might be jobs involving a lot of quick turn-around, like retail sales, especially if the Artisan is also an extravert.

You're not likely to have an Artisan manager, but if you do, enjoy the ride. They can be persuaded by enthusiasm and the chance to play with something new, especially if it relieves their boredom. Just don't be surprised when they want to suddenly shift gears and go in unexpected directions.

What to Try: Find An Artisan

Artisans are relatively rare in hierarchical organizations, but you may be able to find one if you look. Look for them in jobs with a rapid feedback loop, such as customer service and support or retail sales.

Beyond the Basic Temperaments

The theory behind the KTS approach starts with the temperaments just described, using the two-letter combinations from the MBTI. The other two letters "refine" the basic types. Idealists, for example, are subdivided into Mentors and Advocates; Mentors are then split between Counselors and

Teachers, while Advocates are split between Healers and Champions. You can, if you wish, follow the basic types down to their detailed role variants (the Wikipedia page is helpful for that). Doing so can be interesting, and is worthwhile if it helps you understand how to communicate with someone in a clearer or easier way. In general, however, knowing how to categorize managers into the four basic temperaments—Guardians, Rationals, Idealists, and Artisans—is enough to help you structure your discussions with them in a way you are most likely to be heard and understood. In the end, simply knowing you're dealing with a Guardian with a checklist will probably tell you enough about what to do and what to avoid.

Putting It All Together: Communication Strategies

The primary characteristics of the KTS temperaments and their relationships to the basic Myers-Briggs types are:

- *Guardians* combine sensing (S) and judging (J) preferences, which means they tend to proceed step by step and they finish what they start. You'll encounter a lot of them because they form the backbone of hierarchical organizations. When dealing with Guardians, emphasize clear goals, well-considered processes, and concrete accomplishments.

- *Rationals* see the big picture as intuitives (N) and make decisions with a thinking (T) preference. They see the world as a series of optimization problems. Rationals want to design systems to make processes work more smoothly and efficiently. For them, discussions about strategy are welcomed and encouraged, so start at a high level and save the details for later. Stick to the facts and emphasize how you plan to collect supporting data for your arguments.

- *Idealists* combine intuitive (N) approaches with decisions based on gut feeling (F) preferences, but the result is that they care about the people involved and value harmony and ideals. Metaphors are helpful when dealing with Idealists, and it's a good idea to point out how what you're doing will lead to personal growth and self-improvement as well as helping the company.

- *Artisans* come from sensing (S) and perceiving (P) preferences, and the combination means they enjoy stimulating environments and focus on the here and now. When presenting your ideas, emphasize how you plan to explore new possibilities. This type is most likely to see projects as a kind of game. Artisans also will be the type most welcoming to bold, new ideas.

While the Myers-Briggs types have been criticized over the years, the temperaments of the Keirsey Temperament Sorter have a stronger foundation and are based on behavior rather than some innate characteristics of individuals. If the issue of personality-typing comes up in practice (usually with a heavy level of skepticism toward MBTI), remember that the discussions in this chapter try to restrict the application to only those areas that help—how to make your arguments in a way they are most likely to be heard and understood. As the quote at the beginning of this chapter says, "All models are wrong, but some are useful." You may find that knowing the KTS temperament of your boss lets you know how best to approach them. Anything beyond that is great, but may or may not be useful.

It is also important to emphasize that any person can do anything, and that an individual may not be an extreme value on any of the given scales. That's fine. The goal is not to change people's lives or to make career-altering decisions about them. The goal as employees is to understand enough about your boss's behavior to help decide how you deal with them. The KTS is one model for doing so. Hopefully, it will help you in your interactions with your manager.

Managing the Chain of Command

This chapter discusses how to navigate the chain of command that exists inside hierarchical organizations. The chain of command consists of the various levels of management, usually accompanied by increasing levels of authority and resources, that govern decision-making in a company. Dealing with the chain of command is inevitable, and you need to know how to navigate it in a way that avoids getting you into trouble.

The principle to keep in mind, once again, is that managers value loyalty more than you do. Whenever you interact with different levels of management, keep that in mind when you decide what to do. Because higher levels of management also typically interact with you less frequently, any actions you take, both positive and negative, are more likely to stand out. In addition, higher levels of management already have relationships with your management, so any interaction you have with them will be viewed in that light.

To begin a discussion of these issues, consider an example from popular media, the television show *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, hereinafter referred to as ST:TNG.

The Worst of Both Worlds

One of the best episodes of ST:TNG is the finale of the third season entitled, "Best of Both Worlds."[1] One key character of this episode, Commander Shelby, is a challenging individual. She's forceful, headstrong, highly ambitious, and unquestionably brilliant. She does whatever she thinks is correct without worrying about who or what might get in her way. She's a young, hotshot commander on her way up.

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1. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0708785/?ref_=ttep_ep26

Unfortunately, the Enterprise has a (formerly young) hotshot commander named William Riker, who over time has learned to temper his actions with experience.

Naturally, Shelby and Riker come into conflict. Shelby is the expert on the Borg, the invincible enemy they are facing, and in one particular scene she recommends a course of action that Riker feels is unnecessarily risky. Shelby says that she'd prefer Captain Picard make that decision, and Riker claims he'll bring all options to the captain. As he is above Shelby in the chain of command, he thinks the debate is over.

The next scene shows Riker entering the captain's ready room. Shelby is already there, discussing the issue directly with Captain Picard. He backs Riker (of course he does; more on that later), but suggests preparing Shelby's plan as a contingency for later.

There follows a scene in a turbolift (that's "elevator" for the non-Trek watcher) between Riker and Shelby, where he is angry at her for going directly to the captain. She dismisses his concerns.

> **Riker:** *You disagree with me, fine. You need to take it to the Captain, fine—through me. You do an end run around me again, I'll snap you back so hard you'll think you're a first-year cadet again.*

> **Shelby:** *All you know how to do is play it safe. I suppose that's why someone like you sits in the shadow of a great man for as long as you have, passing up one command after another.*

Dramatic, right? That's television. In real life, confrontations with the boss are rarely so tense, though they may feel that way internally. More to the point, Shelby's dismissing Riker's argument and destroying any chance of having a constructive loyalty relationship with him. For all intents and purposes, he is her boss, and she just waved away his objections in a manner that implies she would do so again at any time.

Interestingly enough, whether the decision Riker made is right or wrong is not the topic here. The key is *bypassing the chain of command,* and how that affects the loyalty relationship you have with your boss.

Bypassing Your Boss Has Consequences

When your boss does something you truly believe is wrong, it is tempting to appeal to the boss's boss. This can happen anywhere, but IT people seem to be selected for their low regard for authority, and when a manager makes a decision you feel is wrong, it's natural to want to either ignore it or raise the issue to a higher authority. Managers make that worse by claiming

they want to hear feedback, which is true enough, but misleading. They want to know when you disagree with their decisions, especially when you, as a technical person, have the expertise necessary to understand the issues involved. Your boss's boss will likely say the same thing. What they don't want, however, is for you to come into their office and start complaining about another manager, especially when the other manager is your own boss.

Going around your boss goes to the heart of the loyalty relationship, and that always has consequences. The question to ask yourself is, what is the success scenario here? You want the boss's boss to agree with you and override your own boss, but do you really expect they won't talk about the situation later? Do you believe your boss won't know what just happened? You also just made your own boss look bad to their boss. That, too, will have consequences, and they're unlikely to be in your favor.

What to Try: Conversations With Your Boss's Boss
Always assume your boss will find out about any conversation you have with their boss. Be open about the details, because otherwise your boss may imagine details that are worse than the actual conversation. Your best option is to go through your boss when necessary, ensuring they're part of the process.

Of course you'll be tempted at times to go around your boss. In itself, that's not a bad thing. Having confidence in your own judgment is an important part of success, especially when you're supposed to be the technical expert. As the person "in the field," you are justified in feeling that you are in the best position to make decisions about your area. But before you do anything about it, you need to understand just how risky going around your boss is, and how low the reward is likely to be.

As an example of how this can come up in the real world, consider Mark Cuban, the current owner of the Dallas Mavericks professional basketball team and host of television's *Shark Tank,* a show for budding entrepreneurs. As a young executive, based on his telling of the following story, he appears to have been clueless about the dangers in navigating the chain of command.

How Not to Go Around Your Boss

The April 2013 issue of *Forbes* magazine contained an article entitled, "At Age 25, Mark Cuban Learned Lessons About Leadership That Changed His

Life."[2] The article, written by Cuban himself, describes his early career. In it, he demonstrates an astonishing lack of corporate awareness in several ways, but one in particular is relevant here.

Cuban joined Mellon Bank in Pittsburgh right out of school as part of a team converting the bank from paper records to computerized systems. He says in the article, "a lot of my peers at Mellon were just happy to have a job. I wanted to be more entrepreneurial." He, therefore, decided to take the initiative in several ways. Among them were:

- He sent notes to the CEO.
- He invited senior executives to a happy hour with other young employees.
- He started writing a newsletter.

He thought his boss would love him for it. That didn't happen. As he says in the article:

> Instead, my boss called me into his office one day and ripped me a new one. "Who the f— do you think you are?" he yelled. I told him I was trying to help Mellon make more money. He told me I was never to go over him or around him, or he'd crush me. I knew then it was time to get out of there.

Maybe it isn't just on television where conversations with the boss can be dramatic.

The fact is, Cuban bypassed his boss and then had the nerve to be surprised when his boss objected. Cuban then made the situation worse by arguing that he cared more about the company than the boss did.

No wonder he decided to leave. It's difficult to burn your bridges more thoroughly than that.

Remember: Your Boss Lives in Fear

One of the challenges of being a manager is handling the many fears that come with the job (see (#chp.world) for more on this). Cuban played directly into one of them. Picture the following nightmare scenario for a manager: The manager comes into work Monday morning and there's a message to call the CEO immediately. And the CEO is angry. The CEO demands to know just what the heck is going on in the manager's division, and the manager doesn't know what the CEO is referring to. In fact, the manager has no idea what triggered all this. Apparently, one of the manager's employees "took the initiative" and through some combination of inexperience, ineptitude, or just plain

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2. https://www.forbes.com/sites/monteburke/2013/03/28/at-age-25-mark-cuban-learned-lessons-about-leadership-that-changed-his-life/#1ad60ecb6ade

bad luck, managed to upset the CEO. Now the manager looks incompetent, both because they didn't prevent whatever went wrong, and because they had no idea what their own employee was doing. As managers move up the chain, they try to anticipate their own supervisor's reactions, both to surprise them with solutions when they're asked, and to avoid situations that might cause trouble. Now one of the manager's own employees has jeopardized that, with the CEO no less, and made the manager look bad in the process.

In this particular instance, Cuban didn't upset the CEO, but his attitude made it clear that he was doing everything he could to make that happen sooner or later. Cuban was trying to build a path to the executives that routed completely around his own manager, and when confronted with that reality, claimed he cared about the company more than his own boss did. It's bad enough he was trying to emasculate—that's not too strong a word here—his own manager; even worse was that he thought the boss would be happy about it.

Actually, the worst part of all is that Cuban was still willing to tell this story in print, years later, by which time he should have learned better. Cuban thought his article made his boss look bad (and, correspondingly, himself look good), when all it actually did was prove that the only job he can hold is CEO because he has no idea how to work for anyone else.

From this book's point of view, the real tragedy is that this was all so easy to fix. What should Cuban have done? What would you do? The answer is so obvious it risks being patronizing, but for the record, start with an apology.

What to Try: Apologizing to the Boss

When you make a mistake, offer a real apology.

- Say you're sorry. Offer an explanation if you like, but be sincere.
- Promise not to do it any more.
- Work with your boss to accomplish your original goal with your boss's support.

Save the "non-apology apologies" for the public relations people. A non-apology apology occurs when a person either tries to make an excuse ("I'm sorry, but…") or blames the other person for getting upset ("I'm sorry if I offended you"). A sincere apology isn't difficult, but does require a certain level of empathy. See *The Five Ingredients of an Effective Apology*[3] for a basic primer.

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3.   https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-squeaky-wheel/201311/the-five-ingredients-effective-apology

In the end, the best apology isn't an apology; it's a dedicated effort to fix the error. Anybody can make a mistake. The best way to deal with it is to do your best to make it right.

The loyalty relationship you have with your boss is critical to your success at any level, so when you make a mistake, significant measures may be necessary to preserve it, even offering a sincere apology.

Another feature of this story is that while Cuban claimed he just wanted to make money for the company, it is clear from his actions that he really just wanted to bring more visibility to himself. In the business world, that's not necessarily a bad thing. Management often rewards ambitious employees who are working hard and thinking about the company's success. No, in this case the mistake was not an excess of ambition, it was his obliviousness to the damage he was doing to the loyalty relationship he had with his own manager.

The question then is, "What should he have done?" Is there a way to be ambitious and imaginative that doesn't threaten the most important relationship an employee has?

How Not to Go Around Your Boss, Revisited

The simplest answer is to go through the boss rather than around. Cuban could have scheduled a meeting with his boss for that purpose. It's easy to imagine the hypothetical conversation:

CUBAN: "I just want to show the executives our new ideas and how productive we are."

(Note the use of "our" versus "my" and "we are" versus "I am." Speak as a team, not as an individual.)

BOSS: "That's fine," the boss might reply. "But you're doing it in an awkward way. For example, there have been several attempts at writing a newsletter before, most recently by A. Why don't we contact A and work together on it?"

CUBAN: "I can do that."

BOSS: "Right. Also, while trying to build a social relationship with the CEO might work, a happy hour is not always a good idea. Many people are not comfortable in that environment, especially if they aren't young and single and are trying to balance their work and home life. Plus, it may make people who don't drink feel excluded, not to mention some people are not at their best when alcohol is involved. We already have a company picnic, and there's a calendar of social events, so let's use that instead."

And so on. Notice how the boss is now part of the discussion, rather than outside it. Cuban's approach was like a bull in a china shop, which would inevitably cause trouble. He was making errors of ambition, but acting as though no one in the organization ever had similar ideas in the past. That's where his boss could have helped. In fact, that's one reason the boss is there in the first place. Bypassing that person not only makes the boss angry, it also sacrifices any corporate knowledge and experience the boss might have.

Go through, rather than around. The loyalty relationship you save will be your own.

Providing Cover for the Boss

At times you will disagree with a decision made by the boss. That may even be a common occurrence, depending on your expertise. Keep in mind, though, that the boss's decisions may not come entirely from them. The nature of their position means that the boss may be aware of technical, financial, and political issues about which you know nothing. That's fine and normal. One additional source of disagreement, however, can be your boss providing cover for their own boss.

Sometimes the boss's boss will express a preference for a particular course of action, bad as it might be. Your manager, in an attempt to preserve their loyalty relationship, will not want to blame their boss for it, at least not publicly. Throwing your boss under the bus, as it were, is not a promising road to advancement.

A media example of this occurs in the movie *Apollo 13*,[4] which chronicles the rescue of the "successful failure" Apollo 13 mission to the moon. The relevant scene for this chapter occurs a few days before the astronauts are launched into space. The head of the astronaut corps, Deke Slayton, delivers bad news to mission commander Jim Lovell: one of the members of the backup crew has the measles, and one of the members of his current crew, Ken Mattingly, never had it, and thus is susceptible to catching it. That means there is a slight chance Mattingly could come down with the measles during the mission, and that's not acceptable. The flight surgeon—always overly cautious—is recommending that Mattingly be left behind. Slayton agrees. Lovell argues, but in truth, he has little choice. He has to drop Mattingly from the team.

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4. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0112384

As Mattingly's commander, it falls to Lovell to deliver the bad news. Mattingly naturally does not agree with the decision and offers to go up the chain of command to argue with Slayton (Lovell's boss). Lovell turns him down.

"It's my call," Lovell says.

At best that's only partly true, and Mattingly knows it. Lovell took responsibility for the decision. He is enforcing the decision, but mostly he is providing cover for his own boss.

(For the record, because this movie portrays an actual historical event, it turned out that Mattingly never developed the measles. He did, however, play a key role is helping rescue the astronauts once the mission fell into a crisis.)

What to Watch: Providing Cover for the Boss

Sometimes when your boss disagrees with you, they're trying to provide plausible deniability for their boss. This is pretty advanced behavior, especially for low-level managers, but you may be able to diagnose it if you watch carefully.

Try to figure out if the boss really believes what they're saying. Do they have trouble making eye contact? Do they shift uncomfortably? Do they look guilty? Are the arguments they're making seem inconsistent with what they've said in the past?

There won't be much you can do about it, but knowing the reason for a decision came from above may help you live with it.

When you disagree with your boss and are trying to decide whether to go around your boss, keep in mind that it's possible the boss's supervisor already knows about the situation. For all you know, that person is the one who made the decision in the first place, and your boss is taking the hit for it. Unfortunately, there's no way for you to be sure, because even a direct question will probably not get a complete answer. Your boss can't always be transparent with you, especially when a decision comes from a higher level. Your boss is being loyal to their boss. Once you realize that, not only is it easier to live with the decision, but also it emphasizes how important your boss considers loyalty to be.

Your Boss's Boss

Every relationship evolves to an equilibrium over time. Some people can tolerate more conflict than others. Some prefer more distance than others. Some like to battle. Some like to compromise. In any long-term relationship between two people, eventually they'll work out how to handle conflicts without

threatening the integrity of the relationship itself. Much of this book is about how to build such a relationship with your manager in a way that preserves your own sense of self-respect but still gets you what you need when you need it.

Your boss has a relationship with their boss, too. You may know both parties, but you aren't likely to be a major player in their relationship (and if you are, that's probably not a good thing). That implies that when you go around your boss, you're putting yourself in the middle of an existing relationship where you do not know all the details.

Your boss's boss knows your boss. When you appeal to that person directly, bypassing your own manager, now they're going to know you, too, and not in a good way.

Have you ever been in the middle of an argument between your parents or caregivers? It's not a pleasant place to be. Both sides are likely to turn on you, especially because the argument they are having may be strongly affected by long-standing issues between them that you know nothing about.

What to Watch: Interactions Between Your Boss and Their Boss

Next time you're in a meeting attended by both your boss and their boss, watch how they interact. Specifically, look for unspoken or abbreviated ways of communicating. Are there references to previous projects or subtle nods or head shakes that seem to carry much more meaning than the obvious?

Also look to see the health of the relationship. Do they smile at each other or offer unprompted praise? On the other hand, are there criticisms that seem out of proportion to the current arguments? Does one side or the other dominate all discussions?

This can also be a good time to practice the personality-typing systems. Watch for differences in behavior based on the types identified by the Keirsey Temperament Sorter: Guardians, Rationals, Idealists, and Artisans, as described in Chapter 6, Communicating More Effectively, on page 67. You can learn a lot by watching, but the real message is how complicated even the simplest communication between two people can be.

Using the Chain of Command

Sometimes you are compelled to appeal to the boss's boss. In those cases, what should you do? How should you object when the boss is making a

decision you know is wrong? The answer is easy, though likely to be uncomfortable: go through your manager. Tell your boss that you don't agree with them and that you want to appeal to their manager.

You can say, "I really believe this is the wrong move, and I want to talk to (the boss's boss) about it."

If your manager has any experience or awareness at all, their reply will be, "Fine. I'll come along with you."

Neither your boss nor your boss's boss is going to be happy about this. They'll probably be annoyed, and maybe even angry. But a good manager will likely agree to accompany you to the conversation with their own manager, and if their boss is any good, they'll listen to both of you.

For the record, the resulting conversation almost certainly won't go your way. Regardless of how the situation resolves, however, you go along with it and try to carry it out. You're following the push-back strategy described in Chapter 5, Winning the Prisoner's Dilemma, on page 49. You've expressed your opinion, you negotiate within whatever bounds are available, and then you let it go and get back to work. That preserves the loyalty relationship, and in the long run, you may have helped it by giving honest feedback while still performing your assignment to the best of your abilities. Both your boss and the boss's manager will see that, and that's probably the best you can hope for in most cases.

Compare that to the idea of going around your boss. That goes to the heart of the loyalty relationship and will be condemned by everyone in the chain of command. Remember that the person you're appealing to is also a manager, with the attendant emphasis on loyalty, and you're actively showing that you're willing to disrupt that relationship. If you're going to do so, you better have a really good reason because you're damaging the existing relationship.

When You Have No Choice

There may be times, though, when you feel you have to violate the chain of command no matter the costs. If your manager is asking for something illegal, immoral, or unethical, you have a serious problem. You have to be able to look yourself in the mirror, regardless of the potential cost to your career. Part of being a good professional is following a core code of ethics, and if that's violated, you're going to have a hard time functioning even if you want to stay loyal.

When you have to do what you have to do, you're now in the position of being a whistleblower, which is a tough position to be in even in the best of circumstances.

Most advice in this area involves doing what you must to stay out of jail. That could mean documenting bad behavior or even contacting the authorities. The problem is that keeping within the law doesn't mean you'll save your job or even your career. If a scandal is going on and it becomes public, everyone nearby is tarred with the same brush. You may be operating for the best of reasons, but don't expect to be rewarded for it. Whistleblowers are seldom seen as desirable employees to have around. It's unfair, but not unusual, for a whistleblower to be ostracized even when they're right—sometimes especially when they're right.

Enron and Whistleblowers

The Enron scandal[a] of the early 2000s was essentially a pyramid scheme that cost an enormous amount in both money and people's lives, as well as the economy as a whole. One of the high-level executives, Sherron Watkins, who was vice president for corporate development, wrote the private memo to CEO Kenneth Lay warning him of accounting irregularities in their financial statements. She eventually wound up testifying to the U.S. Congress. She emerged from the resulting disaster as one of *Time* magazine's "Persons of the Year" in 2002 and wound up giving speeches about the problems of corporate culture. She even wrote a successful book about her experiences.

Yet, in the end, she left the field entirely. Frankly, that's about as happy a story as whistleblowers get.

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a.   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enron_scandal

So what can you do? It depends on how serious the problems are. If you simply disagree with a technical decision made by your boss, use the strategy described in Chapter 5, Winning the Prisoner's Dilemma, on page 49 to object and then go along. You register your protest, negotiate, and then let it go.

If you encounter issues within an organization that are so serious that they generate legal concerns, your best option, to be blunt, is to leave. Get as far away from the organization as quickly as you can. When the resulting scandal breaks—and it will—you don't want to be anywhere near it, regardless of any steps you may have taken to cover yourself. In a scandal, everyone is guilty until proven innocent. It's hard to come out clean in a mudslide.

If you can't leave for whatever reason, and you feel morally or ethically compelled to be a whistleblower, then so be it. You need to be able to look at yourself in the mirror, so do what you have to do. Understand that the loyalty relationship has collapsed and any advice in this book is likely to fail.

Still, only extreme circumstances require extreme measures. For most of us, given that we're not near the top of the chain of command and, therefore, probably not involved in decisions that affect huge quantities of money or many people's lives, we're unlikely to be placed in situations that bad. That's one of the advantages of not being on the managerial track in the first place.

Navigating the Matrix

Some organizations employ a matrix management system[5] in which you may report to several different managers who have overlapping responsibilities. One of the running jokes in the movie *Office Space* is that the protagonist reports to eight different bosses, so whenever he makes a mistake, he hears about it from all of them. His biggest motivation, therefore, is to avoid getting criticized, which isn't a good driver for productive work. Anyone who works under a matrix management system knows how difficult it can be to satisfy competing demands from several different managers.

The challenge in a matrix system is figuring out who will be your advocate when it comes time for you to get a raise or a promotion. In a matrix, many "managers" don't want that responsibility. They're happy to provide input, but they don't want to make decisions that affect people's careers.

Whoever makes decisions about raises, promotions, and assignments is your manager, whether they have the title or not. That's the primary relationship affecting your career, and the person you need to focus on.

Admittedly, that can be a challenge. In the end, it doesn't hurt to ask. Ambition is generally seen as an asset, so when you have your periodic meetings, bring it up occasionally. Find out who you need to impress to move to the next level. Whether you ultimately decide to pursue the promotion or not, at least you'll know the key person responsible.

Putting It All Together: Following the Chain

Any hierarchical organization will have a chain of command. As workers, it's natural to disagree with the boss on occasion and be tempted to appeal their bad decisions to the next level. Do so very reluctantly, and do it with the full

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5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matrix_management

knowledge of your boss. If you go around your boss, your boss will hear about it, so operate with that in mind.

When you have a disagreement with your boss that you feel you must escalate, go through your boss to do it. That's difficult and uncomfortable to be sure, but it preserves the loyalty relationship. Just be prepared to lose, and then do what they told you to do in the first place. That will help repair any damage made to the loyalty relationship.

If the problems are so bad you feel morally or ethically compelled to be a whistleblower, then do what you must. Just don't expect to be rewarded for it, or even to have a job afterward. In fact, the best option in that case is to leave before everything blows up, assuming that's a viable option.

The saving grace, however, is that for most of us near the bottom of the chain of command, we're not likely to be involved in the sorts of decisions that wind up in front of a federal prosecutor. There are exceptions, like the Volkswagen emissions scandal,[6] but most of the time this is one of the advantages of not having any real power in an organization. You can advise, but if you're not making the actual decisions, there's only so much trouble you can get into.

6.   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Volkswagen_emissions_scandal

Your Boss Is Not Your Friend

If your goal is to build a constructive loyalty relationship with your boss, this chapter highlights a trap.

The practices recommended in this book are all about building a solid relationship with your boss that you can depend on when a crisis hits. In general, you:

- Provide advice and recommendations to the boss, but let them make decisions.

- Follow the Tit for Tat (TFT) approach to the iterated prisoner's dilemma, which means you cooperate whenever possible and push back only when necessary, and in a way that does not threaten the loyalty relationship.

- Respect the chain of command so your boss is included even when you need to push back against decisions you don't like.

- Respond to requests as quickly as possible with good-enough answers.

- Diagnose your boss's preferred communication style so you can make your arguments in a way most easily heard and understood.

As you might imagine, from a manager's point of view, these practices make you someone they want to have around. And because these professional practices are friendly, your manager may start to view you as a friend.

Be careful. Your boss is not your friend.

Remember, your boss makes decisions about your job and your career. They decide, or at least have significant input into, any raises or promotions that might come your way. In many cases, they decide which projects you get to do and set priorities for your work schedule.

It might seem obvious to say so, but you don't have the same influence over their career. That means there is an inherent power imbalance between the two of you, and you're the vulnerable party. If something goes wrong, you both might suffer, but your experiences will inevitably be worse.

The Dangers of Oversharing

Here is a simple example. Say the company decides to expand into an area you care about. A new project is now available, complete with funding, and you want to lead it. You, therefore, approach your boss to ask for their help in getting that assignment, which likely will involve a promotion.

The problem is, the last interaction you had with your boss went something like this:

BOSS: How are you today?

YOU: Ugh. One of the kids is acting up, and my wife is complaining that I don't spend enough time at home with him.

Now you're asking your boss for a job that may require a lot more time and responsibility. What you don't want is for your boss to think, "I don't know. This job is going to require a lot more of his time and he's already got trouble at home. Maybe I shouldn't add to his burden."

This falls into one of the primary traps: oversharing. You thought your boss was your friend, so you revealed what is arguably an inappropriate amount of detail about your personal life. The hope is that your boss will ignore all of that when it comes time to make decisions about your career, but you can't count on that.

Those sorts of personal considerations should never enter into a decision made by your boss. You can ask your boss to ignore them, but if they really are your friend, will they? It's best not to take that risk.

Remember that there are only two messages you want to give your boss: "I got this," and "I got your back," as discussed in Chapter 4, Sending the Important Two Messages, on page 39. If you treat your boss like your friend, you're interfering with the first message. It's like saying, "I got this, but only if you assume I am fine with all the chaos going on in my life right now." And who wants to say that to someone with direct impact on your career?

That's not to say you should be unfriendly. There's a big difference between being friendly, however, and being friends. The world would be a better place if everyone acted more friendly, but friendship is special. Friends are added

selectively. Some of them may even work with you. That's acceptable, as long as there is no inherent power disparity between you and they aren't making decisions about your job or your career.

In other words, here's how the previous conversation should have gone:

BOSS: How are you today?

YOU: Fine, how are you?

Again, there's no reason to be unfriendly. The boundary you are drawing is an internal one. You're protecting yourself by maintaining a professional relationship with the person who matters most to your career.

## Maintaining Emotional Distance

Say you believe your boss is your friend. Your boss joins the rest of the group in social activities after work. Your boss talks about sports, or movies, or other non-work topics with you on a regular basis. Your boss seems to really care about you as a person.

Now that big project comes along that you want to lead, or at least be a part of. Instead, your boss calls you into their office and announces they gave the position to someone else.

"Hey," you might say, "I thought you were my friend!"

No, they're your boss. Your boss is not your friend.

Recall the agenda diagram from Chapter 1, Making Inevitable Conflict Productive, on page 1, reproduced here:
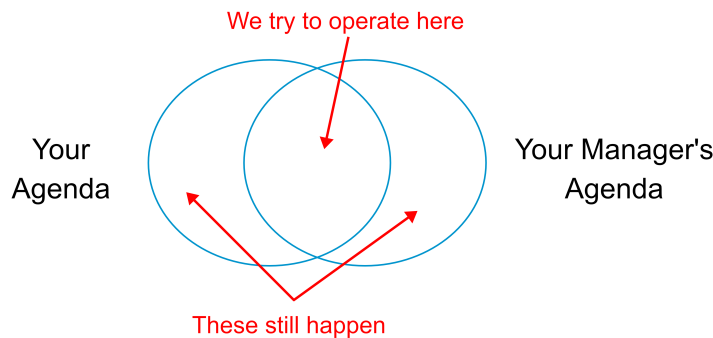
You have an agenda for your job, your career, and your life. Your boss also has an agenda for their job, their career, and their life. We try to operate in the overlap, but the other situations still happen. This was one of them.

Is it possible the decision was personal? It can happen. Maybe the boss believes they're protecting you, as described earlier. Maybe they feel the other person really would be better for the job. Maybe they want to keep you in your current position because you are so valuable there. The decision could come from any number of reasons, some of which might be based on your ability to do the job and some not. If personal issues factored into the decision, it's even more important that you maintain the emotional distance necessary to avoid being hurt.

If you believe your boss is your friend, the first time they make a decision against you, you're going to be surprised and hurt. If your reaction to a decision that you don't like is ever, "I thought you were my friend," you're learning this lesson.

In principle, it's fine for your boss to be your friend when everything is going well. When a conflict occurs, however, suddenly it's "only business." The truth, though, is that that is how business relationships are supposed to work. You're not supposed to be friends with the boss—the boss has too much power over you for that. And while your boss may be sorry they have to take an action that hurts you, their own priorities and incentives sometimes require them to do it.

> **Ken says:**
> ### If You Were Really My Friend...
>
> A manager friend of mine told me that once when he reprimanded an employee for not performing, the employee responded, "I thought you were my friend!"
>
> The manager replied, "If you really were my friend, you would have done your job and not put me in this position."
>
> If you are relying on friendship to protect you in a difficult work environment, think again.

Offices in Popular Media

One reason it's so easy to think of your boss as your friend is that television invariably makes it look like that situation is normal. If you watch any television program that takes place in an office setting, not only do coworkers become friends, they also eventually become family, with the boss as some sort of parental figure.

Nobody ever leaves or gets transferred, because for a character to leave, even with a promotion, the actor would have to leave the show or at least accept a far reduced role. When a character does leave, it's a big deal. There's a special episode for that during which everybody says emotional goodbyes. There's even a period of mourning afterward.

Combine those factors with the frequent exposure to characters with charm, talent, and basic attractiveness, and eventually you have such good friends that all the coworkers become a family. If you grow up watching television involving an office setting, it's practically inevitable that you'll see the coworkers evolve into a family. The problem is that that is not real life—it's television.

In real life, people come and go all the time. In real life, not all workers are great at their jobs or even maintain a positive attitude about their jobs. In real life, not everyone is willing to help everyone else out of a crisis, especially if there is a competitive aspect to raises and promotions.

In real life, your boss isn't a parental figure. In fact, in real life, your boss is not your friend. It can be hard to shake that image, given that it's reinforced by practically every television show that involves coworkers in some sort of office setting, but it's still true.

What to Watch: Our Company Is a Family

Some companies use family language to describe themselves. "We're a family here," leaders will say, or refer to employees as family members.

This is dangerous, or at the very least, disingenuous. After all, families don't lay off members when times get tight. As poet Robert Frost said, "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in."

When company leaders say they want you to feel like a family, they're trying to express a caring relationship. In reality, they're often treating their employees like children, who need to be pro-tected and sheltered, rather than treated with the respect adults deserve. See this article[1] (and others) by Joanna Rothman for more information.

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1. https://www.jrothman.com/mpd/2017/12/organizations-not-families-part-1

My Friend Got Promoted

What if you are friends with a coworker and they get promoted over you? Are you still friends, or not?

Maybe, but it is important to protect yourself. Your friend is now in a position of power over your career, and that changes the relationship. Now your friend is being evaluated by different standards, so their goals and incentives will no longer be the same as yours. Now your friend has to disregard personal issues when making decisions about raises, promotions, or other opportunities or risk being accused of favoritism.

The worst part is, they probably won't realize you're not still friends, because the impact for them is different for all the reasons discussed earlier. You're the one who has to deal with the new situation.

The advice, "your boss is not your friend," is not meant to end friendships. The idea is to make you aware of the dangers of assuming your manager is your friend. The "walls" you are erecting are internal. You want to establish some emotional distance between yourself and your manager so that you are not hurt when they make professional decisions against you, nor do you overshare personal information with them that could affect decisions they make later.

You don't have to sit them down and explain the new situation. Why cause trouble unnecessarily, and allow them to argue with you about it? You just need to build the professional distance necessary to handle it when conflicts arise.

What to Try: Keep It Professional

Next time you have a talk with your boss, watch for clues you need more emotional distance:

- You feel personally attacked when your boss makes a decision that goes against your professional interests.

- You are tempted to share personal details that you hope your boss will ignore the next time they make a decision about your career.

If you find yourself thinking, "a friend wouldn't do that to me," you're probably right and you probably need to adjust your expectations. If, on the other hand, you find yourself about to discuss problems you are having at home with your boss, think about how you might feel later when those issues affect your career.

Your Boss Is Not Your Enemy, Either

Just to be clear, your boss is not your friend, but your boss shouldn't be your enemy, either. Your boss has a different agenda than you do, but there should be an overlap or there's no reason to work together. If your boss makes a decision that goes against you, it's likely the decision fit their agenda more than it fit yours.

If the boss keeps making decisions that hurt you, eventually you're going to leave. That's when the reality hits your (former) boss. The first thing that happens when a professional leaves is that the boss's boss calls them into a meeting and asks some harsh questions, like:

- What happened?
- How did you let the situation get so bad?
- What are we going to do about all their projects? Do we have to hire?
- What about the project deadlines? Are we going to miss them?
- How are you going to handle all of this?

When a technical person leaves, it always makes the boss look bad. Replacing professionals is difficult and expensive, as anyone who has ever been on a hiring committee knows. Finding the right individual, bringing them up to speed on the current projects, training them to be productive, helping them understand the company culture—all these activities take time and money, and the whole time the boss's boss is going to be grumbling about how the whole process could have been avoided.

Neophyte managers may not realize this, but they learn it pretty quickly after one of their direct reports leaves. Then they know to be careful. This is also where the push back part of the prisoner's dilemma comes into play (see). When your boss does something you don't like, you have to push back in a way that does not threaten the loyalty relationship. Do this enough times and it won't be a surprise when you ultimately decide to leave. If you announce you're leaving and your boss didn't see it coming, you've created problems for yourself that may come back to haunt you later. If your boss at least knows you're unhappy, they can decide to either deal with it or make plans for a future without you. Nobody wants what is effectively a divorce, but if it does become necessary, an amicable one is a lot better than a hostile one.

If you maintain your professional distance, at least internally, you can handle decisions that appear to go against you. Your boss is rarely your enemy. If

they aren't, you can push back and get back to work. If they really are, you stand up for yourself and make your own plans for the future.

Putting It All Together: Protecting Yourself

Your boss is not your friend. If you think your boss is your friend, you can be emotionally hurt by decisions that affect your career, even if the decisions weren't personal. You may also be tempted to share personal details with your manager that you then want them to disregard when they make decisions that affect your job and career. Neither of those situations are helpful to you. It's much better to maintain a friendly relationship that focuses on the job, along with assuring the boss that you can handle it and you have their back.

Dealing with Special Cases

This chapter contains "Constructive Loyalty How To" sections. That means it discusses special cases that don't necessarily warrant an entire chapter, but are important situations that arise in practice.

The Flat Organization

The biggest problem with organizations that claim they are *flat*—meaning they don't have any managers at all—is that they think it's a feature rather than a (potential) bug.

As described in Chapter 1, Making Inevitable Conflict Productive, on page 1, it's not surprising that technical professionals run into bad managers on a regular basis. As a reminder, technical workers are not on the managerial track, so they usually deal with managers who are the least experienced and/or the least proficient at their jobs. Because managers, like everyone else in the business world, need to act like they know what they're doing even when they don't, workers often lose respect for them when they make mistakes. This is a problem, but one you can handle as you build a constructive loyalty relationship with them.

The real problem, however, is that technical people may generalize from this experience and decide that all managers are bad, and that even having managers at all is a problem. A classic example of this occurred at Google in 2002.[1] As a company built "by engineers for engineers" (their term), they experimented with a completely flat organization, eliminating all managers in an effort to break down barriers to rapid idea development.

The result was a disaster. Just because nobody has the role of manager doesn't mean managerial tasks don't have to get done. Somebody still has to

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1. https://hbr.org/2013/12/how-google-sold-its-engineers-on-management

handle questions both small and large, ranging from expense report details to interpersonal conflicts to short- and long-term goals, project assignments, career development, and more. If those responsibilities are not designed into the system, they emerge anyway in unexpected ways.

The result is that the people who assume those responsibilities are often not happy. They assumed the tasks because "somebody had to do it," but they are not respected for doing a job nobody likes, nor do they receive a title or compensation as a result. Also, nobody knows who the actual managers are, so it's hard to get advice in those areas. In a flat organization, the easiest way to find out who has responsibility for a particular area is to do it yourself and see who gets mad.

The other problem with a flat organization is that it doesn't scale. If a manager has too many direct reports, they won't have time to do anything but handle them.

Ken says:
Is a Reorganization Coming?

In one company I spent a lot of time in, we used to joke that if any manager had more than ten direct reports, a reorganization was coming. That's an oversimplification, but current research suggests that isn't a bad estimate. Once we went a full five years without a reorganization. That was followed by four reorgs over the next two years.

People come and go in organizations all the time, and others change their positions as they move up (or down) the hierarchy. If too many managers have too many direct reports, expect a reorganization sooner rather than later.

In a company of only ten people, everyone knows who the manager is, even if that person doesn't have a formal title. The manager is the owner. In a company of one hundred people, it's possible your manager is still the owner, but good luck arranging a meeting with that person. In a flat company of 1,000 people, you have a problem, which is likely to show up when a conflict arises between a worker and one of the senior people, who may not have a title, but either through longevity or a financial stake is "more equal than others," to use the term from the book, *Animal Farm.*

An example of that occurred at the company GitHub during its growth phase before it was acquired by Microsoft. GitHub was a proudly a flat organization until it hit a major stumbling block in 2014.[2] One of their employees left, declaring that she had been harassed by a founder at the company (and by

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2. https://www.wired.com/2014/03/tyranny-flatness

the founder's wife). The resulting scandal seriously damaged the reputation of the company.

Without addressing the details of the issue itself, the fact that GitHub was a flat organization at the time meant there were no internal processes or procedures for handling that kind of conflict. There was no explicit chain of command and no human resources department to mediate conflicts. And no one who handled public relations apparently knew how to do it well. The result was a disaster for all concerned. When the power structures are invisible, it is difficult to hold anyone accountable. Sooner or later there will be a conflict that the organization has no good way to resolve.

What do you do when you're in a flat organization? As the saying goes, *follow the money*. In a flat organization, whoever makes decisions about your career, in terms of raises, promotions, or project assignments, is your manager, whether that person has the title or not. That's who to focus on for the advice in this book.

There's nothing inherently wrong with working for a flat organization, and having a hierarchy doesn't necessarily mean companies handle problems any better. But if you're in a flat company that's growing, expect that situation to change sooner rather than later. In the meantime, try to figure out who has the most impact on your career, and build a constructive loyalty relationship with that person.

How Flat Is Flat?

The arguments here claim that a flat organization doesn't scale so problems that are easily managed among a dozen people are much more difficult to manager with a thousand. Some companies manage to stay flat for quite a long time, however, and workers at those companies can be both happy and productive for a long time.

That is entirely possible. Keep in mind, though, that when a company is doing well financially, almost any structure will work. When a company is full of experienced people who like what they do and have many opportunities to do it, most problems are resolved calmly and easily. The problems come when money becomes tight, or when conflicts arise that cannot be handled by a simple negotiation.

In the GitHub example from this section, the company had more than 600 employees before the crisis came, and there were already cracks in the infrastructure that became apparent during that time.

Remote Work

As this book was being written, the world was suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the major changes brought about by the pandemic was to accelerate the trend of people working out of their homes rather than coming into a central office. This has been coming for some time in the IT world, but adoption jumped in the last few months, with companies like Twitter, Facebook, Square, and Shopify all allowing remote work even after the current health crisis was over. The term "WFH," for Work From Home, is now part of the lexicon.

Speaking from personal experience, WFH is great, especially if you don't have young children at home. How productive you are also depends on your company's monitoring requirements, how well the asynchronous communication mechanisms (Zoom, Slack, and so on) work, time zone issues if employees are spread across wide geographical areas, and more.

The goal once again is to build a constructive loyalty relationship with your manager. In order to do that, you need your manager to be aware of what you want and to take your needs into account when making decisions. The challenge introduced by remote work is that when you are out of sight, you may in fact be out of mind as well.

If your company is all remote (as so many were during the pandemic), you're probably safe, because any communications from the manager will be done through whatever remote mechanism is available. If a manager discovers a problem, they'll tell everybody, and you'll be included with that as long as you are carefully monitoring your notifications.

Be Aware of Notifications

If you are a remote worker, the lessons on responsiveness still apply. If your manager wants to contact you, you want to make sure you see that request as quickly as possible and reply to it if necessary. That also applies for notifications that go out to the entire group. So make sure that even if you aren't at your desk, whatever that means, you quickly hear about any issues raised by your manager.

Note that the reverse is not necessary. You don't have to notify your manager any time you are going to be away from your work environment. In fact, it's better not to share too many details, as long as your absence is not long enough to draw undue attention. Just mark yourself as "away," and only do that if you will be gone long enough to be noticed.

The real problem comes when you are working in a hybrid workplace, meaning some of the workers are local and some are remote. If a problem arises, it's all too easy for a manager to come out of their office and tell all team members in the immediate vicinity about it, and only later remember to notify the remote workers.

What to Do: Arrange Periodic Visits

Your manager needs to be aware of you and your concerns. That's true whether you are remote or local, but if you're remote, it's imperative you make sure you're not forgotten. That means arranging for periodic meetings with your boss. If you can come to the office where the manager is located, great, but if not:

- Video is better than voice.
- Voice is better than email.

It should be the manager's responsibility to stay aware of you, but it's not worth taking the chance that they'll forget.

Note that this advice also applies to more traditional work relationships that are still remote, like contract work done in another country. Meeting across time zones is always challenging, but it's really important for the relationship. So much communication is done non-verbally. You really need to see the other person every once in a while to know what they're thinking.

One danger of working remotely is that some managers have trouble giving up much control. They worry that if they don't keep close track of you, you won't do any work. This refers back to the old factory-based repetitive style of labor, where productivity was measured in time spent on the job. Some jobs are still like that, but for most working professionals, productivity is assumed, but much more irregular. Creative people have good days and bad, and can alternate between concentrated bursts of output separated by long, fallow periods where it looks like nothing is going on at all. Part of the process of becoming a professional is learning how to still make progress even during the down times.

If a company has a "time equals money" mindset, however, it may put controls in place to monitor remote workers, from checking in multiple times a day all the way to putting keystroke loggers on workers' machines. To be blunt, not only do these approaches not work, but the biggest result is that they drive all the good people away. Then, after the good people have left the company, managers may declare the process of remote work to be the actual failure, rather than their inability to manage it well.

No matter where your company fits on the remote-work spectrum, your success will be tied to the relationship you have with your manager. The greater the trust you can establish between the two of you, the more flexibility you will have to create the environment that works best for both sides.

The Micromanager

A micromanager wants to do your job as well as theirs. This happens for a few reasons. One typical example involves a technical person who was promoted into management.

The Formerly Technical Micromanager

Sometimes a technical person is so good at their job they wind up promoted into a totally different one. Colloquially, this is often referred to as the Peter Principle, which states that people in a hierarchy tend to rise to their level of incompetence. Employees are promoted based on success in previous jobs until they reach a level where they are no longer able to be productive, because the nature of the new job is different from the old one. This often occurs in technical fields because most companies have only a limited technical track for promotions, so in order to continue to make progress, technical people feel obligated to go into management.

Unfortunately, those sorts of newly promoted managers soon discover that now they are faced with financial matters and planning issues and political conflicts and interpersonal battles, none of which they previously cared about and probably don't enjoy handling now. There is no time available to do any actual technical work, and they can almost feel their technical skills leaking away and becoming obsolete over time. The result is that if an opportunity comes along to do a technical job they know how to do, it's hard not to jump on it.

In this situation, there is good news and bad news. The bad news is that you can't fix it, because you're not the problem. If you, as the subordinate, were going to take the same technical steps the manager intended, all that does is convince the manager that they were right in the first place and now here's a chance for them to be right again doing technical work. If you planned to do things differently, then this is an opportunity for the manager to teach you the "right" way and demonstrate how good they were when they were technical. In either case it's not about you—it's about them.

The good news is that this is ultimately a self-correcting problem. The fact of the matter is that the boss doesn't have time to do both your job and their

job well, and the more time they spend on your job, the worse they're going to do on the management job.

Chances are, the boss's peers (their friends at the same level of management) will explain that to them. A fellow manager can tell your boss that they are making a rookie error. If you do the technical job, they'll say, the managerial job will suffer, and they're being evaluated on the managerial job. That's a bad look, and will eventually attract the wrong kind of attention.

In the end, that's what breaks a manager out of this pattern. Sooner or later, the boss's boss will call them aside and have a rather blunt conversation with them.

"I hired you to do this management job," the boss's boss might say. "If you can't or won't do it, let me know and I'll get somebody else."

This refers back to another point made earlier about the sorts of low-level managers technical people normally see. It's much easier to hire a low-level manager than it is to find a good technical person. A good technical person hired into management sometimes forgets that their new position is more precarious than their old one. A simple reminder, like their boss telling them that they can be replaced, can be enough to get their attention and stop trying to do both jobs at once.

On the other hand, a reminder like that might convince them that they never should have left the technical ranks in the first place, and they may decide to move back to that type of job. Either way, the problem is solved.

The Fear-Driven Micromanager

The other driver for regular managers to become micromanagers is fear. If your boss is afraid that the job isn't going to get done, your boss may feel compelled to take over. Suddenly you are reduced to the level of a lackey, or, if that's too pejorative a term, the equivalent of an intern or student assistant. This feels like a direct slap to the technical person, as it directly questions their ability to get the job done.

A fear-driven micromanager is going to have a difficult time letting go. When other managers tell them they can't do the technical job in addition to their regular job, they can claim they were forced to do so because otherwise the job wouldn't get done. It may even be true occasionally. The problem is that the adrenaline rush of problem-solving in a crisis becomes addictive, and micromanaging one project turns into micromanaging many.

This, too, will eventually be corrected by the boss's boss, but it may take a while, especially if the boss is politically well-connected. It's hard to work for a boss like that.

The way out in such cases is for you as the technical professional to try to reduce the boss's fear by making it clear that you can handle the situation. This is the "I got this" message discussed in Chapter 4, Sending the Important Two Messages, on page 39, but it's not an easy battle, especially if you're struggling.

Recall that in Chapter 5, Winning the Prisoner's Dilemma, on page 49, the recommendation was to push back when your boss does something you don't like. You don't want to do that in the middle of a crisis, but in your next periodic meeting after the crisis is over, it's important to make clear that you would rather have more freedom to solve your own problems. As you grow in your technical ability, it becomes easier to argue for your own expertise, but the required level of confidence can be undercut by a controlling manager. Pushing back (again, after the crisis has passed) helps you stand up for yourself and hopefully gets the message across to the manager that their taking over is hurting your career.

> **Ken says:**
> ### Working For a Fearful Manager
>
> I spent four long years working for a highly experienced technical manager who was promoted into management but was never going to go any higher, partly because he wasn't terribly good at the job and partly because he could never give up the technical work.
>
> Whenever he got scared—which was often—he tried to take over.
>
> As a result, I stopped warning him about possible problems, waiting instead for the problems to become serious enough for him to intervene before letting him know. That attempt to manage his fear didn't work very well.
>
> Eventually, we started meeting every other week, and I was able to report on potential difficulties while they were still small enough to fix with just advice rather than him taking over. That successfully reduced the fear by addressing issues before they became crises, and gave me time to figure out how to handle problems. As my manager built up more trust in my abilities, he was better able to resist his temptation to push me out of the way. Plus, he knew he'd hear about it later if he did so.

There is one strategy to discourage a micromanager, but it's risky. The idea is to remind your manager how much time doing your job is going to cost them. You don't have to say so explicitly. Instead, just list the steps required

to accomplish whatever tasks the boss is asking you to do. This is dangerous, because it can undercut the "I got this" message, and you don't want to look like you need detailed directions at every step. But at some point, the boss is going to remember all the annoying, detailed parts of the technical job that they don't want to do anyway, and hand that over to you.

The best time to make it clear how much more work is needed is at the end of an extended meeting with your boss when you both are planning the next steps. When the meeting is over, other demands on their time will emerge, and they're going to be reluctant to re-engage with your tasks. That's your chance to remind them that you can handle it, especially after all their previous "help."

This is yet another reason why it is important to meet with your boss on a regular basis. That way you can talk about problems before they become so severe that a boss feels compelled to take over, and you can report on progress in enough detail that it reminds them how little time they actually have anyway.

The conclusion is that your best hope is to report on progress frequently enough that the problems you discuss are still small. As you get better at handling the problems as well, you'll be in a better position to assure your manager that you can do the tasks without interference.

The Tragedy of Human Resources

In a way, it's easy to sympathize with the people who came up with the unfortunate term *human resources*. They were probably looking for an expression that was inoffensive to the majority of employees, yet made them feel valued by the organization. It replaced the older term "personnel," or "personnel management," and was way better than the old sexist term "manpower." It's unfortunate that the term "human resources" feels impersonal and can make the actual humans involved feel like they are just commodities, but it's probably the least problematic term we have at the moment. The term is supposed to promote the idea that human beings as objects of worth. At least it is better than referring to employees as human capital.

Modern human resources departments do more than get involved in hiring (and firing) decisions. They prepare benefits plans, keep track of performance assessments, create and enforce policies that ensure compliance with workplace-related laws, and determine the compensation of comparable jobs in the industry so the company isn't paying too much or too little in salaries. If you want to know the actual description of your job, see the copy stored in

human resources. It may or may not relate to what you actually do, but that description is used by human resources to compare with other jobs around the industry.

Note that every function of human resources described is from the point of view of the employer, not the employee. That leads to the key fact that many younger employees do not realize until a problem arises: human resources works for the company, not for you.

If you have a question about your benefits package, human resources is an excellent source of information, or they can place you in touch with the right people. As an information resource, they are fine and usually helpful. But if you get into a conflict with another person in your organization, especially if that person is a manager at a higher level than you, the primary goal of human resources is to make that problem go away as quietly as possible.

The job of the human resources department is to keep the company out of trouble. That means avoiding any potential legal actions and ensuring that any public relations are favorable. That goal is not necessarily compatible with resolving conflicts, ethical or otherwise, with your manager.

There are, of course, good people everywhere. Many human resources staffers are friendly and try to be as helpful as possible. But if the Me Too movement has taught us anything, it's that human resources departments are reluctant to take an individual employee's side in a conflict with management.

One way you can help yourself with human resources is by using the push-back process described in Chapter 5, Winning the Prisoner's Dilemma, on page 49. If you are talking to human resources about a conflict, the first question they will ask you is if you have spoken to your manager about it. If you can point to a series of conversations you had where you expressed your misgivings with your manager, your complaint will be taken a lot more seriously. And if the result turns out to be an exit interview (in other words, you've decided your only recourse is to leave), now you can show why. As stated earlier in the book, you never want the fact that you are leaving to be a surprise to your manager. The human resources exit interview needs to support that.

Older Employees and Younger Managers

If you are a professional who does not intend to enter the managerial track, you'll notice that the low-level managers you report to will keep getting younger and younger over time. After all, they're entry-level on the managerial side,

and you're senior on the professional side. Eventually, you will be reporting to some young whippersnapper who is still wet behind the ears.

That's okay. Both sides can still get what they want. Here are a few points you can bring up in your periodic discussions:

• Institutional knowledge is a great asset.

Often knowing why a system in a company was designed in a particular way is just as important as knowing how to use it. An experienced employee remembers what forces, both good and bad, drove the solution in a particular direction, and if your manager plans to change it, the experienced employee can warn about what conflicts the manager is likely to encounter as a result.

• Older employees are generally more consistent than younger ones.

If you think about actual kids (meaning kids in their teens, as opposed to any person younger than you are), they're practically defined by being inconsistent. A kid contains extraordinary amounts of energy, but may have trouble directing it into productive channels. They also often struggle to make small, steady progress every day. Older people, on the other hand, are usually calmer, more focused, and are able to show steady progress. They are less likely, however, to supply the massive bursts of effort sometimes needed near a deadline.

• Work-life balance is a concern of young people, but is a mandatory requirement for older employees.

No one wants to work sixty, eighty, or more hours a week, and a lot of employees who say they do are exaggerating. But while young, single people will be glad that the company has a ping-pong table and serves good meals at all hours, if you're married with children you need to go home occasionally. Family is what matters, and as people get older, the importance of having a life outside of work increases. Some companies (like those in Silicon Valley) try to build an environment at the office that turns work into a residence, and if you're young and single and just starting out, you may appreciate that. Older people see that for what it is—an attempt to keep you from leaving—and it won't work.

As a final point, as both an employee and as a manager, keep in mind the following principle:

• Because of their experience, older employees can do everything they did when they were young, just not as often or for as long.

Older employees will likely see the right approach quickly, and will make steady progress toward it. But while many people assume that age implies a deterioration of capabilities across the board, the reality is more nuanced. Older people can still do what they did when they were younger, especially in fields that are not based on physical abilities, and sometimes even there as well. (After all, Tom Brady did win the Super Bowl at age 43, which is ancient by NFL standards.) They just don't necessarily maintain the intensity of effort all day long, every day. But then again, younger people aren't as consistent, either, so neither do they.

If you are one of those older employees, one thing to consider is that a young manager might see you in a way similar to how they relate to their own parents. Obviously you don't want to get involved in those issues, but you can use that to help build your relationship with them. It sounds silly to say so, but giving a young person an extra smile or an indication of approval now and then has a stronger impact than you might expect. Even though you report to them, you may wind up acting as a mentor and guide, especially if you can help them avoid mistakes that come from not knowing company history.

So be friendly, if not necessarily friends (see, of course, Chapter 8, Your Boss Is Not Your Friend, on page 99). If you can build a relationship based on mutual trust and loyalty, the result may be more valuable than either of you anticipate.

Truly Unethical Managers

First, the good news: truly unethical managers are rare, and successful ones are rarer still. A person can only betray their peers once or twice before their reputation is destroyed and nobody wants to work with them anymore. So the likelihood of finding yourself working for a truly unethical manager is relatively low.

However, if a manager is truly unethical and has been able to maintain a career that way, their behavior may be part of the overall company culture. Both ethical and unethical behaviors flow from the top. If you're working for an unethical manager in that situation, you've got a serious problem.

Note that the term "unethical" should be applied carefully here. The discussion of personality typing in Chapter 6, Communicating More Effectively, on page 67 emphasized that no person is exclusively one type over another. People are complex and can behave any way they need to in order to be successful, so the idea of labeling someone as truly unethical is an oversimplification.

Any person can behave ethically or not in a variety of situations, based on their own standards and pressures from outside. Everyone in an organization is influenced by the incentives that drive behavior, so it's very important for an organization to design those incentives in a way that rewards ethical behavior.

Ken says:
Examples of Truly Unethical Behavior

A friend of mine was a senior manager in a company when he discovered that his boss was falsifying progress reports to make it look like the company was delivering more units than it really could. The idea was to buy time and that eventually the company would make up the difference. Sooner or later the clients (and government regulators) would realize the fraud (to be blunt about it), and the result would be a disaster. My friend's dilemma was whether to leave, report on the behavior himself, or just wait for the explosion, knowing his own career could be in jeopardy as well.

Note that there is no good answer to that dilemma. In my friend's case, when it all blew up, the boss was blamed. My friend was never going to rise any higher, but at least he still had a job.

I found myself in my own bad situation when I was in a company that was rapidly losing money and in serious danger of going under. The only way to survive was to keep selling our products because we needed the cash in order to pay existing creditors. Selling required us to make promises that we almost certainly knew were not going to be kept, which was a truly miserable experience for all involved.

In that case, the company went out of business (to be specific, the venture capitalists backing it cut off any remaining funds), and everyone had to find a new job.

In a long career, you will likely run into more personal, smaller-scale examples, like theft of equipment or information, harassment of vulnerable employees (a particularly vile form of bullying), or simply lying about compensation, promotions, or other rewards.

When you feel your trust has been betrayed, it's hard not to take it personally. The discussion in Chapter 1, Making Inevitable Conflict Productive, on page 1 reminds us that you have an agenda for your job, your career, and your life, and so does your manager. Most of the time, when a manager does something that appears to act against your interests, nothing personal was involved; your manager was simply following their own best interests, which didn't match up with yours. You need to be sure you're not labeling someone unethical too quickly, partly because as soon as you do, you will become suspicious of every action they take. You'll see bad motives even where they

don't exist. That's a hard way to live, so you need to be sure before you decide your manager is beyond redemption.

Identifying Truly Unethical Managers

Ideally everyone would be open and honest, but in a hierarchical organization everyone restricts the flow of information to one degree or another. Not doing so risks being taken advantage of by others. Unethical people, however, emphasize secrecy to an excessive degree. So when you encounter bad behavior, the first big question to ask is: What will happen if this behavior is discovered?

And then, will there be legal consequences? Will individuals, or even the company, have to pay a fine or face financial hardship? Will someone lose their job? Is someone going to jail? Are your friends telling you to be sure to document everything in case of trouble? That's a very bad sign indeed.

These are extreme questions, but they're designed for extreme situations. Everyone can succumb to temptation, but truly unethical people are rare. Hopefully you won't encounter one in your career.

What happens when you do have to deal with a truly unethical manager? Just as with individuals, a company cannot behave badly forever without being discovered. Sooner or later the truth will come out. The situation, therefore, is not stable. It's going to end, one way or another. Either the unethical person will get caught, or the company will change in some fundamental way, or you will find a way to leave.

Your best bet, therefore, is to try to plan your exit ahead of time. This is another area where a constructive loyalty relationship works in your favor:

- Maintain a professional distance from the unethical manager. Do what you must, but don't just go along with whatever they ask you to do. Be sure to push back (as discussed in Chapter 5, Winning the Prisoner's Dilemma, on page 49) to whatever degree you think won't cost you your job, for no other reason than to document actual cases where you tried to change things before you left.

- Keep emotion out of the discussions as much as possible. That depends on the severity of the behavior ("Our core product is killing puppies and kittens!"), but try to leave the drama for the movies. If you have to leave, then do so. A rage-quit, as they say in video games, serves no useful purpose.

If the behavior is bad enough, and affects enough people or the company as a whole, you may be tempted to become a whistleblower. That topic was addressed , but here is a brief summary.

A whistleblower is someone who feels morally and ethically compelled to report bad behavior to any outside entity that will listen. It's an admission of power-lessness, because if you could have stopped the behavior, you would have. Because you can't, you're willing to do whatever is necessary to stop it, and that includes sacrificing your career.

That's what you're doing. If you do decide to be a whistleblower, your career at that company—and possibly in the entire industry—is over. By definition, a whistleblower is violating the loyalty arrangement at its heart, and there will be serious, negative consequences. To unethical people inside the company, a whistleblower is telling the family secrets to outsiders, and there's nothing more unforgivable than that. Guilty people will hate that, as will others who are just trying to keep their head down and avoid trouble. Worse, whenever you interview at another company, they're going to wonder whether they can trust you to work within their system or not.

That's not to say don't do it. You have to be able to look at yourself in the mirror, and everyone has a line they're unwilling to cross. ("Think of those poor puppies and kittens!") Do what you need to do, just don't expect to be rewarded for it. Hopefully a situation like that will never come up in your entire career.

Putting It All Together: Special Cases

This chapter covered a lot of ground, from flat organizations to remote work to dealing with micromanagers to working for managers much younger than you to handling truly unethical managers. In each case, the plan is to build and use a constructive loyalty relationship with your direct manager, staying professional whenever possible, and pushing back where necessary. If you find yourself in any of these special circumstances, hopefully the suggestions in this chapter will help you succeed.

The next chapter is the last one, summing up everything in the book and looking at what your life can be like when you have a professional relationship with your boss, and how to leave if that becomes necessary.

Managing Your Manager

It is time to bring all the previous recommendations together and see how they work as a whole, in the hope is that the combination will be greater than the sum of the parts. Before that, however, there are a few smaller topics to explore.

Push for Periodic Meetings

Many of the recommendations so far involve interacting with your manager so that each of you can better understand the goals and priorities of the other. To do that, you need to meet with your manager on a regular, predictable basis.

How often should that occur? In most jobs, once a week would be ideal, but once every two weeks can work if you are on longer-term projects that don't require immediate feedback. The fact that you meet at all is important, however, because you both need to learn how to interpret not only what the other is saying, but also what is not being said.

Here's a potential problem that can arise if both sides don't know the other well. As you grow more proficient in your career, you learn:

- Which problems in your area are considered routine.
- Which problems are known to be difficult and why.
- What the experts you respect in your field are trying to solve and what progress has been made so far.

All of these are features of becoming an expert, even if you don't consider yourself one. In fact, as you learn more, the routine problems start to seem trivial and the hard ones look increasingly difficult. One of the characteristics of an expert is that when faced with a new problem, they expert can quickly assess how difficult it is going to be and where the challenging areas will be.

An ironic side-effect of this process is that it's easy to discount your own progress. After all, the easy problems are trivial, so how much expertise could they require? The hard problems are difficult and frustrating, so how much of an expert could you be if you struggle with them? Most experts spend the majority of their time on hard problems (otherwise they tend to get bored and want to move on), so they have to face their own limitations on a regular basis.

Taken to extremes, this is a special case of imposter syndrome,[1] which everyone experiences to one degree or another.

> **Ken says:**
> ## All the Math I Know Is Arithmetic
>
> I have a friend who used to say, "All the math I know is arithmetic." She's a highly trained scientist and part of her job is numerically solving complex partial differential equations, so her assessment of her own abilities is pessimistic, to say the least. I know her, so I understand what she's really saying. If she understands a problem, it's easy, and if she doesn't, it feels impossible, at least for the moment. I also know that she just needs to vent, and with a bit of encouragement or just friendly listening, she'll find her way eventually.
>
> The key for her success is that her manager needs to understand that as well.

Your boss needs to know you well enough to know that while you may be fumbling at the moment, the situation is temporary. They don't need to take over, or cancel the project because it's impossible, or do anything else drastic. The only way they're going to reliably make that judgment, however, is if you have built enough of a relationship that they understand when you're just relieving pressure versus when you really do need help.

Convincing Your Manager to Meet Periodically

In most cases, this is easy. Every decent manager I've ever met schedules meetings with all of their direct reports on a regular basis. Rookies sometimes resist that. Sometimes it's because they don't feel they have anything to contribute. Most of the time it's because they realize how much time and effort that would take on their part, and they don't want to do it.

(Incidentally, that makes for a good interview question. During a job interview, ask your prospective boss how often they meet with their direct reports. If the answer is "rarely" or "only when necessary," consider that a bad sign.)

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1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Impostor_syndrome

How do you persuade your manager to meet anyway? Managers think in terms of minimizing risk and lowering costs. Therefore, argue that regular meetings are worth their time. Tell them that in those meetings, you can let them know:

- What problems you are experiencing on the current project(s), so that they can be handled while they are still small.

- What you've accomplished since the last meeting. That reminds them where you are along the path toward success, and it reinforces in your manager's mind any successes you might have had so far.

- What concrete tasks are turning out to be more difficult than expected and why, and whether you believe the two of you need to update any plans.

- What you plan to do before your next periodic meeting.

The argument is: *periodic meetings catch problems before they become crises*. Doing so helps minimize risk. That's an easy argument to make, and has the added benefit of being true.

What to Try: Ask for Twenty Minutes

When you propose periodic meetings, suggest that you need only twenty minutes. Less than that is too easy to dismiss when either you or your manager are too busy that week. More than that starts to sound like a burden. A manager will never schedule a meeting for twenty minutes. Instead, they'll block out half an hour, hope to finish early, and therefore have time to prepare for their next meeting.

An added benefit is that it will sound like you're trying to be considerate of your manager's time. They may see through that immediately, but agree anyway and try to hold you to it. Twenty minutes, however, is long enough to get into whatever deep issues you want do discuss, so it will be hard to stop abruptly. After all, there are ten minutes left, so why not use them?

Admittedly, this is a bit silly and manipulative, so feel free to dismiss it. Keep in mind that the real goal is to establish periodic meetings with your manager, whatever their length, and this trick might help.

Seek the Happy Path

In the IT world, when designing software, the "happy path" is the case where everything works exactly as intended. It's time to re-examine an example used back in , concerning the different agendas that exist between you and your manager. In

that example, you wanted to use a new programming language in part of an existing project because (1) you think the new language is better, (2) you like the new language and want to learn more, and (3) you believe knowing that language will be good for your career. Because switching languages on an existing project introduces an element of risk, you know your manager will be reluctant to approve it. In that chapter, you quietly implemented a portion of the project in the new language "on your own time," and only presented it to the group when everything worked, and then hoped your manager liked the results enough to keep you out of trouble.

Based on what you know now, a better approach would be to bring up the issue with your manager during one of your periodic meetings:

YOU: "I recently saw a presentation on Kotlin, and I'd like to learn more. I think it could help us in several ways."

BOSS: "Interesting. What do you have in mind?"

YOU: "I'd like to carve off a piece of this project and implement it in Kotlin, both as a way to learn it, and as a demonstration of its advantages."

BOSS: "I hear you, but this project is on the critical path, so let's not risk it. Instead, we have this other project, which has a much lower priority. We don't have time to dig into it now, but if you can wait a while, we can try it on that one. Plus, I already have a new person working on it as a way to bring them up to speed, so you could both learn at the same time."

Now your manager knows one of your goals for your career growth. Rather than go around them, you told your boss about it so they can be part of the planning process. Your boss can now decide where and when to apply the new technology in a way that will minimize the risks to the group and the company.

It might not go like that. You might be turned down completely. You then push back (as described in Applying TFT to the Employee/Manager Relationship, on page 56) and get back to work. Later, when another opportunity arises, you can remind the boss about this discussion and try again. Over time, your boss will look for ways to get you what you want in a way that's consistent with their agenda, too.

All of this depends on those periodic interactions, so do your best to arrange them.

Telling Malice from Stupidity

As you build a relationship with your manager, sooner or later your manager will do something you don't like. You'll push back, as in Applying TFT to the

Employee/Manager Relationship, on page 56, and when your boss does it again, you'll push back again. Unfortunately, after a few times, it's easy to start wondering if your boss really does have it in for you.

That's a trap. While it's true that you will be constantly evaluating whether or not the relationship is worth the time and effort you're investing, you don't want to start seeing problems that aren't there.

The common expression for this is, *never attribute to malice that which can adequately be explained by stupidity.* Once you no longer trust someone, you'll start seeing hidden motives even where they don't exist.

Most of the time, that suspicion is unfounded. Managers follow their own priorities and incentives. Most of the time those will overlap yours, but sometimes they don't. When they don't, the danger is believing the manager has some grand plan that's causing them to act against your interests, when in reality, they're just not very good at their job.

The trick is to know the difference. When you see hidden motives, make sure you evaluate their actions consciously. If you decide that the relationship really isn't salvageable, then consider moving on. But even then, it's worth pushing back first to see if any improvements are possible. Believe it or not, it's easier to live with a manager who makes stupid mistakes that may be corrected in the long run, than a boss who really does have a grand scheme that doesn't involve you.

Reflective Listening

Though communication strategies were discussed in Chapter 6, Communicating More Effectively, on page 67, you can use another technique from psychology to good effect when talking to your manager. The skill of *reflective listening* involves two steps:

1. Understand what the speaker is saying, and then
2. Repeat it back to them to confirm you understood it correctly.

Reflective listening feels very artificial at first. You may feel quite self-conscious simply repeating what the other person said. But everyone wants to be heard and understood, and by reflecting back what the other person said, you confirm both that you were paying attention and also that you were truly focused on them.

The real benefit of reflective listening is that it encourages the speaker to keep talking. Getting accurate information in any organization can be difficult, especially when it comes to people's motivations. When you paraphrase to

someone what you believe they just said, they feel obligated to either confirm it or correct it, and either way they continue the conversation.

Trained interrogators take advantage of this all the time, and so can you.

Telling Your Boss They're Completely and Totally Wrong

As a final word of advice, here is an incredibly useful phrase you can use whenever your boss says something ridiculous. The phrase is:

That turns out not to be the case.

You can add, "I can see why you might think that" to add an extra layer of diplomacy (pro tip: try not to roll your eyes while saying it). But the line to remember is, "That turns out not to be the case." It's a beautiful phrase. It says to your boss that you heard them, you understood them, you applied their suggestion to the current situation, but it didn't quite fit. It's about the most non-confrontational way to say no ever devised.

Feel free to use that phrase on your boss, your partner, or anyone else you need to disagree with safely. It's much more diplomatic than "I think you should sell your house and everything you own and put a down payment on a clue." That doesn't go over nearly as well.

If you remember nothing else from this book, remember the phrase:

That turns out not to be the case.

In fact, feel free to use it on me if you disagree with anything in the book.

Putting It All Together: The Real Win

There's an old saying that goes, *Even if you win the rat race, you're still a rat.*

One of the main theses of this book, articulated in Chapter 1, Making Inevitable Conflict Productive, on page 1, is that conflict with your manager is inevitable because you both want different things. The good news, however, is that because you are not directly competing, it is possible to find resolutions to those conflicts that satisfy both sides in the long run.

That doesn't work if every conflict between you and your manager has to have a winner and a loser. It is all too easy in the business world to think of conflicts that way. Because a good relationship with your direct manager impacts your success in the organization in many ways, if you get into a battle like that with your manager, even when you win, you lose.

Many people prefer to avoid conflict, and conflict with someone who has power over your career is scary. That's why when most professionals get into a conflict with their managers, they prefer to avoid it as long as possible and eventually decide to leave when the disconnect becomes too large. The strategy described in Chapter 5, Winning the Prisoner's Dilemma, on page 49 is an attempt to give you an approach that avoids going to either extreme. It helps preserve your own self-respect, while building a constructive loyalty relationship (from Chapter 3, Creating Constructive Loyalty, on page 25) that will benefit you in the long run.

The question is, if you're not trying to "win" a particular conflict, what are you trying to achieve? What's the real goal?

Put simply, what you really want is *to be heard.*

Everyone has a strong desire to be listened to and understood, and when people feel they are not being heard, they get frustrated and angry. This is one of the biggest contributors to conflict in any relationship, and arguably in society as a whole.

It seems obvious to say, but one step to being heard by your manager is to talk to them. That's why periodic one-on-one meetings are so important. You can also make those meeting more productive by structuring your communication in a way you are most likely to be understood, as discussed in Chapter 6, Communicating More Effectively, on page 67.

Everything in this book about building a professional relationship with your boss (as opposed to a friendship; see Chapter 8, Your Boss Is Not Your Friend, on page 99) is about accomplishing that goal. Throughout your career, you will be continually evaluating any manager you have, and the central goal in each case is the same: you need your manager to take your goals and priorities into account when they make decisions that affect your career.

Once you know that your manager hears you and understands you, it's a lot easier to forgive decisions that fit their agenda and not yours. Likewise, when they know you hear them as well, they will place more value on the relationship, and they will want to keep you around and keep you happy.

That's the real win: being heard and understood. Everything in this book is about achieving that goal on both sides of the employee/manager relationship. Hopefully, the advice given here will help you reach that goal.

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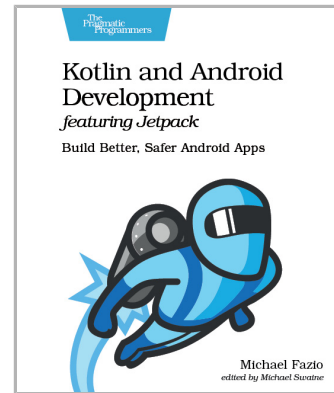
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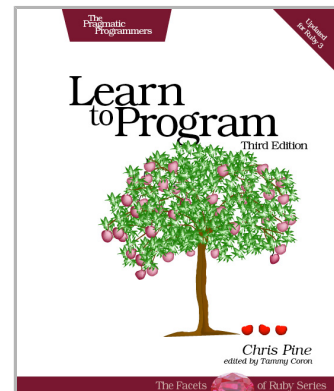
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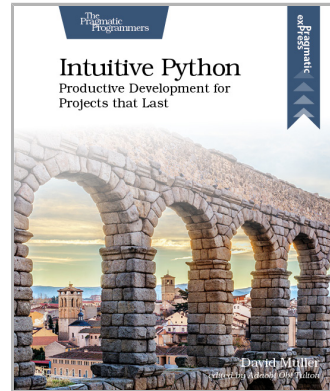
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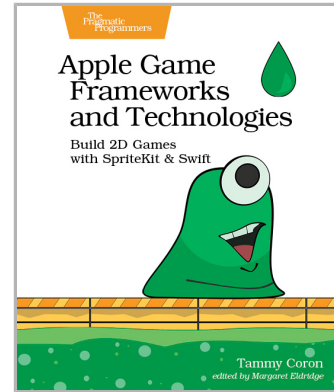
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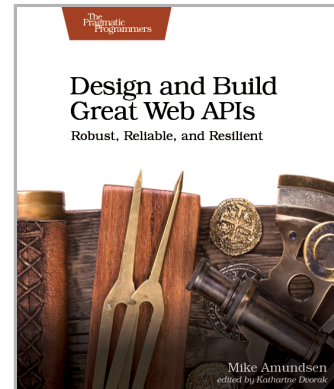
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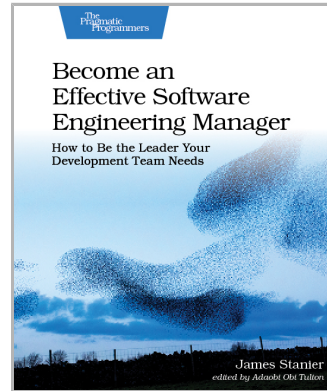
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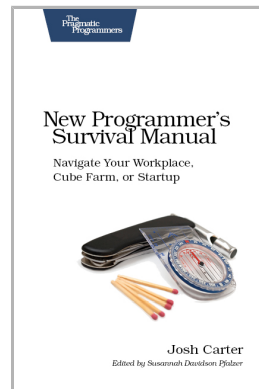
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