

Managing Up

Effective Leaders and members make and take time and energy to manage their relationships with supervisors. In addition to managing the relationship with the leader's direct supervisor, the VISTA Leader is responsible for supporting members as they establish healthy relationships with their own supervisor. This effort can simplify both the Leader's and member's service year by eliminating potential problems.

The supervisor-member relationship is one of mutual dependence between two fallible human beings. Leaders and members must have a good understanding of themselves and their supervisors. Effective Leaders and members will use this understanding to develop a healthy relationship, compatible with both persons' work styles and expectations.

This can only happen if they must seek out information about the supervisor's goals and pressures, by tactfully questioning the supervisor, and being an astute observer of his or her behavior.

Adapting to a new supervisor is an opportunity to develop new skills and to demonstrate your abilities to establish strong and cooperative working relationships.

In the beginning it may be important to adapt your work style to that of the supervisor. Her preferred way of doing things isn't meant as a judgment on another way: it's just what works for her.

Pay attention to the supervisor's statements about her likes and dislikes, then fine-tune your actions appropriately. Of course, there's bound to be some give-and-take between his preferences and yours, but showing a willingness to adapt, say, to his level of formality in dress is a good early signal to send.

In "Managing Your Boss" (*Harvard Business Review*, 1980), John Gabarro and John Kotler suggest you pay particular attention to:

Communication Style

Determine the format, frequency, and depth of information the new boss wants. Consider how she expresses herself and what style of messages she's most receptive to. Does she prefer a formal memo, or a casual chat?

Getting this issue straight from the start will minimize misunderstandings and help you and your supervisor feel more comfortable with the new relationship.

Managing Up (cont.)

Decision-Making Style

How does the supervisor make up her mind? Is she methodical? Intuitive? Or somewhere in between? In justifying a purchase, for example, will she respond better to a line-by-line cost/benefit analysis or to an eloquent argument that it will increase client and community satisfaction?

Other clues to what she values include her pet projects and proudest achievements, as well as anything said after “What I really like about that is . . .”

Clarifying Mutual Expectations

Ask the new Leader what she wants you to achieve. If she hasn’t had time to learn exactly how you contribute, offer an overview of your recent work and current projects. Listen carefully to the supervisor’s responses, from “That’s nice” to “We need to do more of that!”

In addition to establishing common goals, make sure the supervisor knows what support you need. What kind of guidance, resources, and connections to other staff do you hope her to provide? Most supervisors will be relieved to hear how they can help you, because doing so will help them be more productive from the start.

Put Yourself in the Supervisor’s Position

If you’re having trouble understanding a supervisor’s actions, style, or goals, consider her point of view. What are her organizational and personal objectives? What pressures is she facing? What are her special strengths—and in what areas is she not so strong?

You can get many of the answers to these questions by asking the supervisor directly. Fill in the background by asking reliable people who’ve worked with her before.

The transitions and changes that come with a new supervisor can be unsettling, but they’re also an opportunity to shape your future to the benefit of your VISTA service—and to your own benefit. *The more energy and consideration you devote to getting off to a good start with your supervisor, the stronger the foundation you’ll establish for long-term success.*