

# 20 Thoughts on Dealing with Upper-Level Management

*By Geoff Bellman*

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This article comes from a list I use when talking with trainers, consultants and staff managers about personal and departmental effectiveness.<sup>1</sup> I'm presenting it with the intent of stirring some useful ideas in you. The list is not so much about techniques as it is about *intentions*; it's not so much about methodology as it is about *style*. These 20 thoughts have been useful in helping explain to myself both why I am effective and ineffective.

A practical use of this article might be to review it before or after an important meeting with management. Read over the main thoughts and score yourself. Are you using your resources in ways that move you and your organization towards success?

## 1. The power of position versus the power of expertise

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Trainers and consultants who play the formal authority game find out quickly that they lose. Some of us sit around lamenting while others look for what they have to build on. Some of us are kept around to do management bidding; others are consulted on matters important to organization direction. The former are servants to the authority of their management; the latter are empowered by their expertise.

## 2. What do you have to offer?

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Most of us have answers to that question that sound pretty good at an ASTD meeting, but how do those same answers sound to a line manager? Put yourself in the shoes of the line managers in your organization: Would *you* hire you? Would *you* pay for your services? What can line managers expect from you that relates to what is important to them? Can you express what you have to offer in terms that line management understands? If you have something important to offer to the organization, its importance needs to be understood outside your department. If you have nothing important to offer, why are you there?

## 3. Management wants you to decide what you should do

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"Why doesn't my boss tell me what he expects of me?" "Management just won't say what they want done!" When management isn't telling you what to do, maybe they don't know what to do. Assume they think it is *your* job to tell them what you think should be done. At this moment many of us are sitting around our organizations waiting for management direction when we should be directing ourselves and telling management what we think should be done.

## 4. Risk putting forth your ideas

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This hinges directly on the last thought but deals with the more fearful element of expressing what we believe is needed. Express yourself knowing that most of the time you'll be at least partly "wrong." What you recommend or suggest will not be exactly what management is looking for. Much to your frustration and disappointment, they will alter your splendid plan or eliminate part of your well-integrated recommendation. Their action, seen more positively is called "taking ownership" or "building commitment."

## 5. Risk being converted

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Most of us have dealt with a number of managers who just will not hear our viewpoint. Repeated attacks (using our best noncoercive skills) don't dent their armor. and what do we

remember of what the manager was saying to us? Take off your battle gear and listen for the content and feelings that Carl Rogers spoke so well about. Risk understanding the manager's message at both a content and feeling level; risk confusion as you try to put his or her thoughts up against your own; risk conversion to their viewpoint as you understand it better.

## 6. Are you willing to risk as much as you expect them to risk?

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Think about and feel the impact of the changes on the organization that you want changed. Think about the impact on the manager of that organization. What would he or she have to risk? How much of a change would it represent in management style? Day to day behavior? Now somehow, total up all that risk and ask yourself if you would be willing to risk as much in your job. Too often we are better in writing prescriptions than we are at taking medicine. Both are important for improved health. Our behavior should model the risk taking we expect our line management clients to take.

## 7. Model! Model! Model!

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Look on all your behavior as a model for the line management that you work with. It is a model for them, like it or not; try to see that it is a positive and useful model. Model management planning processes, performance appraisal, model financial responsibility, model feedback and listening, model decision-making, model leadership styles. Learn from yourself as you watch yourself move through these behaviors.

## 8. Think ideally; act practically

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In the confusion of our daily work lives, it is difficult to maintain direction, stability and peace without some sense of the ideas for which we are reaching. Call them ideals, fantasies, hopes, dreams, values, or needs, but do call them something. Talk them out, express them out loud to someone else, and write them down. This effort will provide you with more focus when you meet with management. It will provide you with the personal reasons behind those practical recommendations you build. Remember that the actions you take have to withstand at least two tests- one against your ideals and the other against management's views of organization needs.

## 9. Don't give your expertise away.

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Too often the only questions we ask line management are about what they want and when they want it done. To the extent that we just ask those questions, we are giving our expertise away. We are saying, "Line management, you should do and I'll do it!" (Who is supposed to know more about training and development?) Ask for more information about the situation management wants dealt with, and for a short time to decide what you think is most appropriate.

## 10. Your respect for management shows

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We communicate respect in many ways. If we believe the kind of work a manager does is important, that will show. If we believe a manager is worthy of our effort and attention, that will also show. Respect means accepting that they are doing the best they know how in their situation. It means accepting their frailties, foul-ups and weakness along with their successes, strengths, and growth. Think of managers you have had difficulty working with.. Do you

respect them? There is a very good chance they already know your answer to that question. you've told them in many subtle ways.

### **11. To gain respect, be respectable!**

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Most effective managers are looking for people they can gather around them and can respect. You earn respect by taking actions they consider "respectable." You may find that those actions are different from what you value most. Select that creative middle ground, from the alternatives available, that allows you to meet some of your needs as well as some of theirs.

### **12. Of course they don't understand. do you?**

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"He doesn't know what training is all about!" "His idea of good training is a lecture with fresh doughnuts at the coffee break!" "She won't release her people to go to training programs and at the same time she expects more performance of them!" We have thousands of ways of expressing how line managers do not understand what training is all about. And we're right; they often do not understand.\*

### **13. But do we understand?**

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Do we understand as much about their jobs as we are expecting them to understand of ours? Do we know what combines to make up that "bottom line" they watch so closely? Can we read and interpret a financial report? Do we understand how their jobs are changing with the building internal and external pressures? Your line management already knows how much we understand. it shows every time you talk with them. That image is what they are using to guide their conversations with you.. What is their image of you?2

### **14. The department has earned the reputation it's got**

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Many of us feel we are unjustly saddled with departmental reputations that do not represent where we are today, and we spend time complaining about this. Our organization behavior backgrounds tell us that this is quite a natural phenomenon. Though dated, our reputation has been earned. Just as we are living partly with a reputation created by our predecessors, so people who follow us will live with our shadow over them. Accepting this allows us to spend more energy on actions that will eventually change our image with management. An important subpoint: As one individual, you will not likely be able to change the department's image. It takes a number of people operating effectively over some time to life a sagging image. One individual working alone will be seen as an exception to the rule rather than an indication that the whole department is going to change.

### **15. Establish patterns of success**

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Building an image of yourself as an effective contributor (or of your department as an important arm of the organization) depends not on one success or two, but on a pattern of success through time. For some of us this means overcoming a pattern of mediocre performance or even worse, failure. Negative patterns that exist on us individually or on our department will only begin to disappear when we counterbalance questionable performance with positive successful performance through time.

## 16. Important change takes time

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Distrust quick important changes. The people you converted quickly today can be as quickly converted again by someone else tomorrow. Patience, perseverance and consistency are bywords of long-term change in large organizations. Those bywords apply as you consider change that you recommended three years ago, installed two years ago, repaired last year and are now hoping will maintain themselves during the next year.

## 17. Grow though small successes

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Too many trainers and consultants are waiting for the "big score" in their organization. They are looking for the project or program that justifies the skill they can lavish upon it. In the meantime others are taking smaller projects close at hand that seem important to line management. They are demonstrating accomplishment on these projects and being considered for other activities involving more responsibility as they earn the manager's trust and respect. Management is hungry for people who can accomplish things. Show them you can do things well and they will use you and eventually listen to you.

## 18. Give management an "out"

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The idealistic trainer or consultant who presents a comprehensive program of organization change is often denied the opportunity to start. Instead, see that management is provided the opportunity to approve the program on a piece-by-piece basis, and allowed to both guide the project and become more committed to it as they make the decisions on it. Propose your large system changes in small, evaluatable parts that have an upward compatibility. Then build on the successes of the smaller parts. A grandiose program that fails after having involved many people across the top of the organization is remembered a long time. A smaller effort that doesn't make it far off the ground can be dropped before it does noticeable damage to the organization or the consultant.

## 19. Focus on what they do, not what they say

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We can waste much time trying to convert management to our language. We'd be better off spending that time trying to understand them and use their language. Don't worry if management doesn't say the "right words." Those right words are likely to be training and development jargon that contribute more to misunderstanding than understanding. Instead concentrate on the actions that management takes and measure the compatibility of those actions with your intentions. The eventual outcome of your projects with line management is measured most importantly in line management jargon. Save your professional vocabulary for others in your profession.

## 20. Murphy's World

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Most of us have heard of Murphy's Law (if something can go wrong, it will). Well, for the large organization this is Murphy's World. Every day it seems that something is going wrong somewhere. For verification of this, just attend an ASTD meeting or workshop, an OD network meeting, or the ASTD National Conference, and you will find your associates gathered in small groups talking about how "screwed up" it is back in their organizations. How many of these discussions do we have to participate in before we begin to realize that it's screwed up everywhere! There's no greener grass on the other side of the fences; there isn't even a fence!

We are all in the same large pasture, nibbling on the same grass. Recognizing this, believing this, provides a surprising amount of comfort. Energies that were spent on complaining can now be spent more constructively on making our organizations better places to work in.

## 21. "A living"

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That's the answer, now what's the question? The question is, "What do you call an organization with as many problems as yours has?" Sometimes we talk about what's happening in our organizations in ways that would seem to indicate something horrible is wrong and it should all be corrected (if possible) tomorrow. and the next day we could hold a trainers and consultants meeting at the State Unemployment Office. Some of us are working to eliminate our jobs. Others are working hard on the daily problems and opportunities of the organization with the realization that those problems and opportunities will never end as long as the organization lives.

Tens of thousands of organizations have recognized the continuing need for training and development departments. They keep us around to handle those day-after-day problems and to advise them on how to develop their human resources. And we keep saying things like, ".and you won't believe what he did with his employees the other day!" Or, "Then she told them they were going to do it her way - the day after completing our training program!" We seem to be constantly amazed by the problems that come up that are the very reason that line management put us in business in the first place.

## Conclusion

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In reading over these 20 thoughts, I'm sure you've found some that echoed thoughts of your own. Maybe I reinforced your biases from another viewpoint. If you found some that you disagree with, that's helpful too. Perhaps in the disagreement you got more clarity on what your own beliefs are. My own reaction to the list, as I look back over it, is that it feels a little too "professionally patriotic to be practical." And at the same time I know that it is more practical for me than any individual method or technique I use

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**Notes:** <sup>1</sup> Forrest Belcher, Stan Herman, Dugan Laird, Geary Rummler and Mary Weisbord each influenced parts of what is included here. <sup>2</sup> (How come whenever anyone up the organization doesn't understand it's a problem and when anyone down the organization doesn't understand it's a learning opportunity?)

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