

SMALL Business Times

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Treat the boss as a customer

My thanks this month to TEC/Vistage resource Ian Cook, a principal of Fulcrum Associates, experts in team-building and leadership. He has developed some great ideas about how to improve your relationship with the person to whom you report.

Right up front, he identifies some super payoffs:

- More personal influence within your department.
- Higher responsiveness to your needs and concerns.
- Better personal image in relation to other employees.
- A solid “sponsor” to help move along your career.
- A bigger salary.

He then presents six tips to achieve these payoffs:

1. Treat your boss like a customer.

One of the first priorities in customer service is to understand what customers need. Try taking out a pad of paper and jotting down what you believe are your immediate superior's most important needs. Some of these will undoubtedly include:

- No surprises, please.
- “Give me the bad news sooner rather than later.”
- Present possible solutions to current problems.
- Respect my time pressures.
- Follow through.

2. Identify what your boss expects from you.

Some managers think in visual terms. So presenting information in graphics, Power

Point or 3D models is far more powerful for them than spoken or written descriptions. Others prefer a well thought-out oral report with bullet points. Still others respond best to a written report that includes a succinct executive summary.

The second aspect of living up to your superior's expectations is to know what level of performance is expected from you, and how you are expected to accomplish it. The only way you can get this information is to ask for it on a regular basis. Believe me, your openness and candor will go miles toward making your boss smile.

3. Let your boss know what you need.

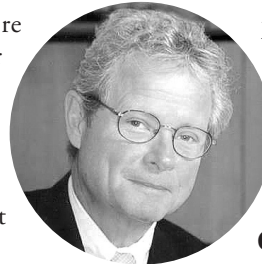
Knowing what's expected of you is one thing, but you need the tools and the knowledge to meet these expectations. We're not talking, by the way, about the proverbial “wish lists” like better lighting, more sound-proofing, and other material items. More often than not, additional professional job training fits the bill here.

4. Stand out from others with your self-initiative.

Cook talks about being the “go to” person, which is another way to describe self-initiative. The bottom line is that your boss sees you as a reliable person, who comes back ready to help again, after you've already given beyond the call of duty.

5. Wear your self-esteem proudly.

There are two kinds of employees you definitely don't want to be. One is the “pleaser” who will say anything to agree with the boss. The other is the “contrarian” who always disagrees. Being on the same



page with your superior should mean that you feel good enough about yourself to agree or disagree. Consistent honesty gains the biggest rewards in any company.

6. Make your suggestions tied to your superior's priorities.

Think again in terms of treating your boss like a customer. If your boss considers accuracy of work a priority, offer ideas on how to improve accuracy. If your boss disdains meetings that result in rambling and no clear results, then suggest how a tight meeting agenda can be implemented to solve the problem.

Here are some other ideas from our TEC members regarding what their highest performers regularly do:

- Serve as a mentor for one or more of their own subordinates.
- Volunteer for community activities and charities that promote the image of the company.
- Join professional self-development programs. In southeastern Wisconsin, those groups might include Executive Agenda and Management Resources Association.
- Volunteer to lead in-house training programs.
- Cross-train to other functional specialties.
- Be a company “ambassador” during customer visits.

The point of all of this is that a manager's job description doesn't begin to tell the story about what a high-performing manager really does for the company. The process of becoming a high performing manager must begin with an assessment of their superior's needs and expectations.

The assumption here is that bosses deserve an assessment because they're in a credible leadership role and their reputation deserves this kind of attentiveness by a subordinate. If that isn't the case, then it's obviously time for the subordinate to move on.

Some years ago, I watched a young man progress in a metal products company in the Milwaukee area that, at the time, had about \$50 million in sales. He began his career as a second-shift foreman with only a high school education. Today, 30 years later, he's a COO with 350 employees under him. Along the way, he got his college degree and MBA. He also became a private pilot and is very active in local area civic groups. He fits the profile of the ideal employee I've

described in this article.

We keep talking about raising the bar in tough economic times. It seems to me that this is very much a two-way street. It must start with the president, but it must be reciprocated by aggressive managers who respond in turn. This is a must to beat the competition and keep the company growing at a healthy clip.

Until next month, as managers, ask yourselves, what am I doing for my internal customer, my boss?

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