

Collaborative Success: Aligning Personal and Organizational Objectives in the Workplace

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Abstract

This article delves into the concept and practical implementation of “managing up,” proactive strategies employees use to strengthen their relationship with their supervisor, by emphasizing the importance of aligning one’s goals. It investigates the potent idea of integrating personal work objectives with the larger organizational vision, which in turn cultivates a more efficient and harmonious supervisor–employee dynamic. Encouraging employees to synchronize their work priorities with those of their supervisors and their organizations not only enhances collaboration, productivity, and overall success but also fosters improved focus, efficient resource allocation, and better decision-making within library settings. Drawing from professional and management literature, along with empirical research and the author’s personal experience, this article presents recommendations and actionable strategies for effectively managing up while concurrently improving performance as a supervisor and organization.

Introduction

Many librarians find themselves in middle management positions where they must navigate the expectations of both the employees they oversee and the leadership above them. These roles can be particularly challenging when there are competing priorities, shifting institutional goals, or misaligned expectations between different levels of the organization. Middle managers often experience pressure from multiple directions, making it difficult to balance advocacy for their teams with responsiveness to administrative directives. While these challenges add complexity and stress, they also create opportunities for librarians to develop strategic thinking, adaptability, and proactive leadership in pursuing their goals.

This article explores the concept and application of “managing up” strategies, specific approaches employees can use to strengthen supervisor relationships in ways that benefit both

the organization and themselves, focusing particularly on goal alignment to foster positive working relationships and shared success. While the primary focus is on what employees can do to improve their situation, these strategies also offer valuable insights for supervisors seeking to foster more effective workplace dynamics. In the pursuit of improving organizational performance, examining the experiences of employees and supervisors while strategically adapting behaviors can be powerful. Drawing on professional and management literature, as well as empirical research and the personal experience of the author, this article presents strategies for effectively managing up and aligning individual goals with the mission and vision of a library.

In this article, managing up is defined as the techniques, strategies, and processes an employee can proactively use to effectively and positively impact the relationship they have with their supervisor for the benefit of the organization and themselves. Two aspects of this operational definition should be highlighted. First, the focus of this exploration is on what the employee can do to influence their situation. This article advocates that the employee takes an active position in working with their supervisor, even if that active position is one of reframing their perspective of their situation. Second, the focus of this article is on positive, collaborative influence, not manipulation, self-promotion, or control. In hierarchical structures, it is easy to focus on competition and self-protection. While there may be times when intense rivalry, driven by self-interest and the pursuit of outshining others, can benefit the organization, this article focuses on influencing others through positive means. By thoughtfully considering their role as an employee and as a supervisor, while strategically synchronizing their own objectives, librarians will be better positioned to do that.

Why Is Managing Up So Important?

Managing up is an important skill set for any employee, particularly given the inherent complexity of supervisor–employee relationships and the power differentials they involve. In hierarchical institutions like libraries, these dynamics can be especially challenging, as employees often have less control over outcomes and higher stakes in conflicts, creating greater risk for them. However, supervisors face many of the same pressures as their employees, along with additional responsibilities related to institutional priorities, administrative demands, and team oversight. While this dual perspective might ideally foster empathy, it often results in added stress and reduced capacity to offer support. Complicating matters further, supervisors may either lack a clear understanding of an employee’s specific responsibilities,

especially if they come from a different department or field, or have deep expertise in that area and struggle to relinquish past methods.

These dynamics can lead employees to feel vulnerable, particularly when the relationship is dysfunctional, causing them to become unhappy and less satisfied with their jobs and even experience negative impacts on their health and well-being. However, managing up can help transform this experience by empowering employees to proactively influence their situation, thereby increasing their sense of self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and psychological capital. A 2014 review of literature focused on psychological capital, the cognitive and emotional abilities that can be developed to improve one's performance, found a positive relationship between job performance and higher psychological capital (Newman et al. 2014, S126–27). Similarly, in 2020, researchers found that while impacts varied for teams, having a strong relationship with their supervisor improved an individual's performance (Mumtaz and Rowley 2020, 174). The effects of the interactions one has with a supervisor can also linger from day to day. A 2019 study found that an employee's perception of their relationship with their manager affected feelings of well-being and energy. Additionally, the impression of whether interactions with their supervisor are positive or negative can impact how an employee feels the following day (Ellis et al. 2019, 130–32).

Goal alignment with the organization is another crucial aspect of managing up, as it ensures that an individual's work has a meaningful outcome and contributes to their motivation and engagement. By aligning individual professional goals with the broader organizational mission, an employee increases their engagement and gains clarity about their role. Researchers also found that strategic alignment improves organizational performance (Kim, Kim, and Kwon 2020, 18). This alignment fosters transparency between the employee and their supervisor, making expectations clear and reducing potential misunderstandings. As a result, it strengthens trust between employees and employers, as both parties work together toward common objectives, leading to a more effective and collaborative working relationship (Ribeiro, Da Costa, and Ramos 2024, 25).

Finally, managing up is often an uncomfortable topic to discuss, making it challenging for library staff to navigate these crucial professional relationships. Consequently, there is often a significant knowledge and skill gap in this area. This article argues that management skills, including aligning personal and organizational goals, should be taught and practiced, yet they frequently are not. In the relatively insular world of libraries, staff may often be promoted into management positions due to immediate needs or opportunities. While this approach can be valuable for retaining institutional knowledge and ensuring continuity of services, it often

overlooks a critical aspect: employees promoted to management roles may receive little to no support, training, or mentorship to develop the necessary management skills. Moreover, management skills are typically viewed as essential only for those in upper leadership roles, leaving middle managers as well as individual employees without adequate training in this area. As a result, basic management skills are often limited, leading to the neglect of “managing up” in the professional development of many levels of library staff.

How Can One Effectively Manage Up?

Given the impact that the relationship with their supervisor can have on an employee and how that can make the supervisor–employee relationship especially challenging, it’s important to explore strategies that can be used to strengthen this connection.

Build Trust

Research has shown that trust is an important mediating factor in the supervisor–employee relationship. However, trust between an employee and supervisor can erode when communication is limited or filtered, often as a result of power dynamics and a fear of negative consequences. Research by Vakola and Bouradas (2005) found that a supervisor’s attitudes strongly impacted whether or not an employee shared their thoughts with them (451).

Employees may avoid raising concerns so as not to appear difficult or disloyal, especially if past attempts at open dialogue were dismissed. When employees default to being agreeable just to maintain harmony, the end result is that the supervisor isn’t always informed, or the information they receive has been filtered, making it harder to understand the employees’ perspectives.

Ultimately, how employees feel about their supervisor and how they behave toward them is influenced by the level of trust that exists. One 2012 study explored the relationships among psychological empowerment, trust in one’s supervisor, asking for feedback, and job performance. Huang (2012) found that the more empowered employees felt or the more they had a sense of self-determination, the more likely they were to trust their supervisor. This feeling of trust helps reduce the fear or “cost” employees might feel when asking for feedback (Huang 2012, E117–18). Another study showed that seeking feedback can help employees improve their performance (Whitaker, Dahling, and Levy 2007, 582). Therefore, when seeking to improve one’s own performance, an employee’s relationship with their supervisor and the trust built with them can be essential to that goal.

Employees can use specific strategies to help establish trust. In their classic 2005 *Harvard Business Review* article, “Managing Your Boss,” Gabarro and Kotter (2005) emphasize the

importance of understanding both a supervisor's context and the employee's own situation (95). This insight underscores the value of gaining a deeper understanding of one's supervisor to effectively manage the relationship. Various strategies in the professional world, such as exploring personality traits and working styles, can aid in this process. Some resources advocate for a more analytical approach, like Steve Arneson's (2014) book, *What Your Boss Really Wants from You: 15 Insights to Improve Your Relationship*, which helps employees view the work environment from their supervisor's perspective. Regardless of the method chosen, closely examining what a supervisor does, says, and values can significantly enhance interactions with them. A few questions to help with that discovery process include the following:

- What is their professional background? How well do they know your specific area or type of librarianship?
- What's their communication style like (email, structured or informal meetings, interpersonal communication)?
- What performance factors do they care about (customer service, high numbers, employee satisfaction, completing tasks/goals, etc.)?
- Do they have a professional or personal agenda for the organization?
- What are their strengths and weaknesses?
- How do they deal with stress?
- Who do they influence? What's their position in the larger organization? How do others get along with them?
- How well do they manage up?

When building trust, it is also important that the employee cares for and learns about the organization of which they are a part and in which they are serving. One way this can be done is to think about how the organization functions and its role within the larger institution or community. Depending on how information is shared, this may or may not be easy information to obtain. This is especially true when an employee is several levels from key decision makers in the organizational hierarchy. There are, however, some techniques that can be used to glean needed insights. *The Department Chair Primer: What Chairs Need to Know and Do to Make a Difference* (Chu 2012, 102–6) offers some questions that have been adapted to help with that process:

- What is the organizational hierarchy of your library? Can you find an up-to-date organizational chart listing all the people and their positions?
- What is the larger organizational structure (city, university, etc.) that your library is a part of?

- Are there guiding documents (strategic plans, reports, budgets, etc.) that provide a larger vision and picture for the library?
- What other groups or departments does the library work directly with and why?
- What internal and external challenges is the library facing?
- Are there internal and external opportunities available to the library?
- What does the library's budget look like, how is it organized, and who manages or controls that budget?

How does responding to these kinds of questions help an employee work more effectively with their supervisor and build trust? More than likely, a supervisor, especially those with organization-wide responsibilities, is thinking about some or all of these questions themselves. By trying to understand the organizational structure and how it functions, the employee is more aware of the issues or problems their boss is facing and can be more thoughtful in how they support and work within the organization as a whole. Knowing that an employee can be counted on to remember the big picture and not only focus on the issues impacting them personally helps a supervisor have faith in the employee's appreciation of the library and respect for what it takes to successfully manage such an organization.

Another simple and effective strategy to build trust in the workplace is to be proactive and focus on solutions. A 2022 study by Gajendran, Mistry, and Tangirala highlighted the importance of proactivity in developing and maintaining positive supervisor–employee relationships. The study found that employees who engaged in proactive behaviors such as problem-solving were more likely to have strong, trusting relationships with their supervisors and receive higher manager-rated performance evaluations (Gajendran, Mistry, and Tangirala 2024, 400–2). For instance, having previously taken the time to understand a library and the community it serves, an employee can better present solutions that align with organizational goals. To effectively focus on solutions and build trust, employees should start by breaking down problems into smaller, manageable parts and brainstorming potential solutions. Demonstrating initiative by offering help in specific situations further reinforces a problem-solving mindset. Additionally, leveraging available resources, such as colleagues, tools, and information, can enhance the quality of proposed solutions. Testing and iterating on these solutions ensure that the most effective approach is identified and refined.

These strategies not only help employees perform their jobs more effectively but also support supervisors in doing their work more efficiently. However, it's important to recognize that building trust may not be entirely within the employee's control. A supervisor may not be receptive to these efforts, and employees may not always have access to the information

needed to fully understand their supervisor's or organization's priorities. Acknowledging these limitations helps set realistic expectations when using these techniques.

Prioritize

In addition to caring for and learning about their organization, it is also important for library employees to prioritize their work so that it builds upon what they have discovered. Supervisors and employees often operate with different priorities and perspectives. While employees may focus on their own responsibilities and needs, supervisors must also consider broader organizational goals, policies, and team dynamics. These priorities can shift frequently due to institutional changes, staffing needs, or strategic initiatives. As a result, supervisors are often balancing individual concerns with the bigger picture, which can lead to misunderstandings if those differing perspectives aren't acknowledged. However, it's important not to overlook the role of communication breakdowns or top-down decision-making in contributing to these disconnects. Without transparency and meaningful dialogue, the burden of understanding should not fall solely on employees.

Regardless of a supervisor's ability to communicate effectively and transparently, one way that an employee can utilize the knowledge they have acquired is to create Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound (SMART) goals, which can then be aligned so that they reflect the library's priorities. Start by identifying key projects or initiatives within the organization and set personal goals that contribute to these efforts. This could involve taking on additional responsibilities or developing skills that are critical to the success of these projects. If a library or its parent organization has disseminated specific metrics for those projects or initiatives, an employee could track how they are contributing to those benchmarks.

Another way an employee can prioritize their work while aligning their efforts is to offer to work on projects that utilize their strengths while meeting their library's needs. If it is a stretch assignment—work going beyond their current skill set or experience—they'll have the opportunity to grow in areas that are important to them and their library while demonstrating their potential and increasing their visibility within the organization. Taking on work that expands their knowledge also increases an individual's "learning agility" (Harvey and Valerio 2022, 280), which has been found to be a strong indicator of success as a leader (De Meuse 2019, 30).

Manage Yourself

As mentioned previously, research has shown a correlation between psychological empowerment and job satisfaction. The more an individual feels they can change their situation for the better, the happier and more confident they will be, resulting in better job performance.

These factors also contribute to a positive and successful relationship with one's supervisor, making it worthwhile to consider how to effectively manage one's own performance. Several strategies can be employed to create these positive outcomes.

In managing oneself, an employee should think about and understand the communication differences between them and their supervisor. For example, if they value and practice directness, they will probably expect others to behave in a similar, forthright manner and become frustrated when others let awkward problems fester. On the other hand, individuals may feel assaulted when there is no consideration of the impact that a difficult message may have. Paying attention to these different perspectives and approaches to conflict management can help an employee gauge not only the receptiveness to a message and style of delivery but also what one would be willing to risk in terms of relationships when dealing with challenging situations.

Similarly, diplomacy is a crucial communication strategy that employees should master, particularly when navigating disagreements with a supervisor. Researchers have found that using a "supportive voice" and framing a project or suggestion as beneficial to the organization fosters positive responses from supervisors (Burris 2012, 862–63; Grant, Parker, and Collins 2009, 49). While it can be difficult for an employee to comply with the requests of a supervisor whom they may not like or respect, it's important to recognize that supporting and responding appropriately to the direction being provided is often necessary to achieve organizational goals. However, when an employee disagrees with their supervisor, it's essential to manage the situation diplomatically. This can be done by clarifying what is understood and setting expectations through statements like, "I know you expect me to successfully complete this project, therefore I will..." or "Unless I hear otherwise, I am planning on X. Please let me know if you prefer another approach." Such diplomatic strategies not only help in establishing clear expectations but also provide an avenue for negotiation. By consistently presenting ideas as contributing to the greater good and creating win-win scenarios, an employee builds a reputation for prosocial behavior, actions that benefit others and foster cooperation, which can provide them with more flexibility in future interactions, even when more contentious issues arise.

When communicating with a supervisor, it's also important for an employee to use the language of their organization. If key concepts like "student success" or "community growth" are integral to the organizational mission or goals, these ideas should be correlated to one's work. By incorporating them into conversations, reports, and other communications, an employee will make it easier for their supervisor to see how they are contributing to both their goals and the

organization's overall objectives. This approach also increases the likelihood that their proposals and requests will be approved and supported, as they are clearly aligned with the organization's priorities.

Although the focus of this article is primarily on the behavior of the subordinate (i.e., employee), experiences gleaned from supervisor–employee interactions can inform and help improve one's own supervisory skills. Managing people is difficult and should be approached with a full awareness of how impactful the supervisor–employee relationship can be. Evaluating a supervisor's performance should also involve considering one's own skills and abilities as a manager and leader. This can help independently identify areas for improvement and methods for achieving those improvements. Just as an individual benefits from an improved relationship with their supervisor, the people they lead will also benefit from efforts to improve the relationship with them. This work will foster trust and encourage all employees to engage in proactive, managing-up behaviors, ultimately providing support and making the supervisor's job easier.

Self-advocate

Finally, it is essential for employees to become their own best self-advocates. The more an employee feels like they can change their situation for the better, the happier and more confident they will be and the better performance they will have. It is worth their time to consider strategies they can adopt to support their own welfare.

To be one's own best self-advocate, it's essential for an employee to care about and actively develop their career plan. It is not the responsibility of a supervisor to think about where an employee will be in ten or twenty years, and there are no promises that a specific position won't change or be eliminated. The belief that one can remain in the same role for an entire career is flawed and can lead to stagnation. Similarly, assuming that there is an established career path forward when there isn't one or that the employee is a viable candidate for future openings even when they lack the required skills is unrealistic. The needs of the communities that libraries serve continue to change, and employees must change with them. To stay adaptable and avoid limiting one's career growth, select individual goals that serve as solutions directly contributing to the library's success, highlighting how personal achievements can enhance the success of the entire team. Linking one's skills and accomplishments to key metrics within the organization demonstrates value and merges career aspirations with the library's objectives. Employees should also build on supervisor feedback by seeking ways to improve their skills through both

formal training and self-education. Developing a clear career plan and identifying specific steps toward desired roles can be done proactively without waiting for formal organizational approval.

Another way employees can positively self-advocate is by thinking strategically. This involves considering the broader needs of the library in an employee's decision-making process. While it's important for employees to sometimes prioritize their own needs, they should do so with an awareness of the impact on others and the opportunities it might create for them. Engage stakeholders both inside and outside the organization to gain diverse perspectives and prioritize resources by thinking cross-functionally, focusing on high-impact areas, and considering how decisions will affect other units. Incorporate learning into processes by taking time to reflect and iterate on actions. Strategic thinking also involves creative problem-solving, such as finding ways to achieve goals even when resources or support are limited. If an employee doesn't initially get what they want when working with their supervisor, they should work to create win-win scenarios that align with the organization's goals and appeal to outcomes leaders care about.

One way an employee can help themselves is to assist the supervisor in recognizing that they are a good employee. Often known as "impression management," this strategy can take many forms. It might be as simple as a quick for-your-information email letting a supervisor know that a task or project has been completed. It might also involve demonstrating engagement by communicating interests and what one enjoys working on. If a supervisor is open to it, one can also celebrate successes and milestones with them. While research indicates that the effectiveness of impression management can vary depending on the specific motivations of the employee (Bowler, Halbesleben, and Paul 2010, 313) and the personality traits of the supervisor (Weng and Chang 2015, 7–8; Den Hartog, De Hoogh, and Belschak 2020, 277), it can also help an employee gain influence and make navigating one's library culture easier.

While self-advocacy should be seen as an opportunity for growth, it's important to acknowledge that developing a career plan, engaging in strategic thinking, and managing one's professional image all require time, emotional energy, and a sense of psychological safety, not all of which may be readily available to every employee. In high-stress or unsupportive environments, some individuals may feel overwhelmed by the expectation to manage both immediate responsibilities and long-term goals. Still, investing in these efforts can serve as powerful tools for building confidence, expanding influence, and aligning one's professional path with the broader success of the organization.

Conclusion

Supervisor–employee relationships are often viewed as one-directional, with limited opportunities for employees to influence and improve their circumstances. There is no doubt that the way a supervisor leads has a significant impact on how employees experience their work. However, this article challenges that limiting perspective by offering empowering strategies that help employees take a more active role in shaping those relationships. Managing up, when approached with intention and care, can lead to a more satisfying work life for employees and contribute to better overall outcomes for the organization. This article explored why managing up is important, the personal and organizational benefits of goal alignment, and the impact that poor supervisor–employee relationships can have, and it provided strategies to address the knowledge and skill gaps that often leave employees underprepared to navigate these dynamics.

While managing up offers important tools for agency and professional growth, there are limitations to its effectiveness as a strategy. Employees may not always be able to create the change they hope for, due to factors like a supervisor’s lack of receptiveness, poor communication, and limited transparency, or high-stress, unsupportive environments. Additionally, employees may not always have access to the information they need to fully understand or align with their supervisor’s or organization’s priorities. These limitations underscore the value of future research focused on strategies to mitigate the barriers to an employee’s ability to manage up effectively.

Overall, being able to effectively manage one’s relationship with a supervisor does more than improve individual experiences; it contributes to building healthier, more resilient organizations. By equipping employees with practical tools to navigate these relationships, this article presents critical skills that often go unacknowledged in professional development.

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Published: November 2025