

Self-Leadership Challenge #14: How to Successfully Manage Up to Your Boss and Across to Your Peers

A potential new [executive coaching client](#), Ethan, came to my office one day, confused and distressed due to the results of his 360-degree feedback report.

The good news was that his direct reports adored him. “Best boss ever!” one had written. Another gushed, “I love coming to work because I get to work for him!” They described him as open-minded, friendly, sincere, a good listener, firm when he needs to be, a boss who clearly communicates his objectives, and then follows up effectively. Without a doubt, Ethan was doing things right when it came to leading his team.

The not-so-good news came from two other sources—first, from Ethan’s two bosses, one direct and one dotted line. These two superiors saw him in a completely different way, evidenced by their critical comments. Here are just a few examples:

- Lacks initiative
- [Lacks visibility](#)
- Doesn’t facilitate discussions
- Doesn’t offer visionary ideas or examples
- Needs to be more tenacious
- Doesn’t lead from the front
- Needs to develop a broader network among his peers and next-level managers

The second source of not-so-good feedback news came from Ethan’s *peers* who were equally critical:

- Should get involved more
- Needs to hold discussions to resolve matters
- Doesn’t engage the broader group
- Has unclear objectives
- Communicates poorly
- Doesn’t get enough support to make things happen
- Shows a lack of ownership

Ethan was shocked and upset with the results. “How can the outcomes amongst the three groups be so different?”

I asked Ethan to reflect on how much time he spent—in any given week—with direct reports vs. his boss and/or peers. He paused for a second, and then responded, “Come to think of it, I probably spend about 95% of my time with my direct reports.”

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The “penny dropped,” as they say, and Ethan realized he was spending much less time managing “up and across,” which automatically meant that his bosses and his peers simply didn’t see him in action all that much. The feedback was a clear indication that Ethan wasn’t managing all of his stakeholders with the same level of focus.

I have seen this challenge with multiple coaching clients. When you are at the mid-level of an organization, you are learning how to get results from the individuals and teams you supervise. So, it’s understandable that, up to that point, you would focus on “managing down.” After all, early in your career, leading staff is a major factor in your success; it helps you get promotions, raises, and gain status and a good reputation within the organization.

But that isn’t how it works as you move up to higher positions in an organization. With increasing necessity, balancing time with *all* stakeholders becomes more critical. Indeed, managing superiors and same-level colleagues—managing up and across—becomes just as important to your career as managing down. Let’s explore this common gap in a senior leader’s [self-leadership](#) arsenal.

Managing Across to Peers: How “Connected” Are YOU™?

Two of my coaching clients, Joelle and Hritesh, were partners in the same law firm. Their styles and priorities were vastly different: Joelle consistently built her internal network, taking time for peer lunches, connecting with fellow partners for dinners, and setting aside work for five-minute chats with colleagues in the office. She also took time to connect people in her network with each other, helping them build their own networks and relationships. In short, she demonstrated good self-leadership when it came to managing *across*.

Hritesh’s focus, however, was primarily external, and he spent the bulk of his time keeping clients satisfied and bringing in business. He didn’t really [see the importance of building internal relationships](#)—after all, he had cases and files to move off his desk, and there never seemed to be enough hours in the day for anything else.

Both partners brought in roughly the same amount of revenues, and for a while, they were at the same level in the firm’s organizational structure. But within just three years, Joelle had advanced very quickly, catapulting herself up not just one, but *two* levels higher within the firm. Hritesh, on the other hand, remained in the same post despite his aspirations to move up. His one central mistake: He hadn’t built solid internal relationships.

It isn’t uncommon for people to reach levels close to the C-Suite and not make it to the highest levels of the organization because of one thing: *They didn’t cultivate positive relationships with their peers on the way up.* So, learning to manage *across* is a very important self-leadership skill. After all, a peer today may become your subordinate – or your boss - tomorrow.

How Do You Coach “Up?”

If you're like most leaders, you probably think of “coaching” as what you do when you lead and direct others who work *for* you. But it can also be an extremely effective tool when applied to any relationship, including coaching *up* to bosses and *across* to peers. Here are a few tips to follow:

1. One of the best techniques for coaching up and across—that is, for guiding bosses and peers to new, more effective behaviors—is to first, make an objective, factual statement, and then ask powerful, open-ended questions that are aimed toward the big-picture, higher-level arena within the organization. It takes a bit more time and creativity than simply telling bosses and peers what's on your mind, but asking good, strategic, open-ended questions builds relationships, trust, and transparency and can have positive, long-lasting effects.

By open-ended questions, I mean questions that don't elicit a one-word “yes” or “no” response but require the other person to elaborate. By *asking* and not *telling*, you will get others to pause, reflect, grow, and come up with answers.

2. Pick the right time. Neither you, your superior, or your peer should be in a rush or tired at the end of a long day.
3. Get into a good frame of mind. Approach the conversation with curiosity. You're here to explore, so don't go into the discussion attached to a specific desired outcome or expectation.
4. Get out of the “me vs. you” mindset, and rise up into “we.” Ask yourself: What positive outcomes can come from this conversation that will not just help us work together more effectively, but will support the overall objectives of our team, our function, and the company?
5. Prepare—and practice out loud—the words you want to say until they sound natural and you feel comfortable.

As you can see, self-leadership requires that you make a conscious effort to regularly manage up to your boss and across to your peers.

Reflect... Are you spending enough time with each of your various stakeholder groups? Assess your current situation, and devise a plan to start managing more effectively up and across within the next two weeks.

For more self-leadership tips, pick up a copy of my latest book, [Leading YOU™: The power of Self-Leadership to build your executive brand and drive career success](#).

BRENDA BENCE

**BUILDING SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP BRANDS
FOR COMPANIES AND EXECUTIVES**

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In one of her recently released books, *Leading YOU™: The power of Self-Leadership to build your executive brand and drive career success*, Brenda brings her many years of transformational coaching successes, insights, examples, and real-world stories to the rewarding task of helping leaders reach their full potential.

After earning her MBA from Harvard, Brenda spent the bulk of her career as an executive in *Fortune* 100 multinationals, building brands across dozens of countries spanning four continents. Now, as President of her own company, Brand Development Associates International, she travels the world speaking, training, and coaching individuals and companies to greater success through creative, yet practical, personal and corporate brand and leadership development. Visit www.BrendaBence.com.

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