MANAGING UP

How to Get What You Need – from the – People in Charge

'Turn potential conflicts into opportunities for growth'
Daniel H. Pink

'Outstanding. A better way to get ahead at work'
Greg McKeown

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"Wilding masterfully explains how to thoughtfully navigate those difficult conversations that often define our career trajectory and turn what can be an anxiety-ridden, transactional relationship with our boss into a true partnership."

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—Amy Gallo, cohost of HBR's *Women at Work* podcast and author of *Getting Along*

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To Brian, who manages to fill every day
of our life together with joy and love

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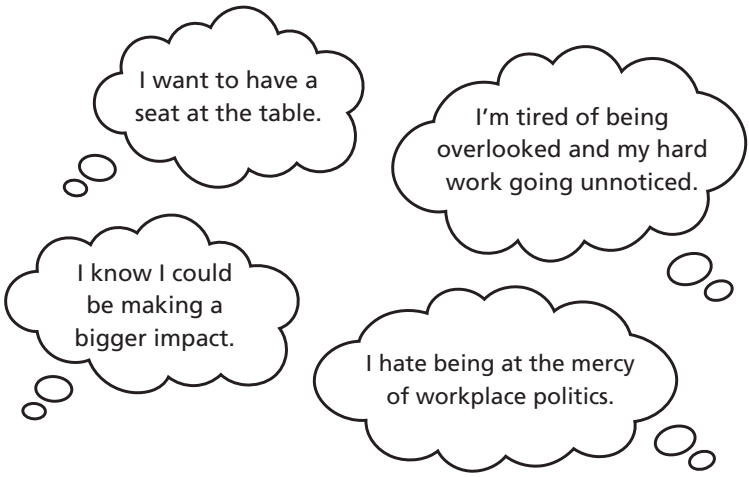
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INTRODUCTION



Laura was used to getting tough feedback, but nothing in her career had prepared her for the mixed messages and moving goalposts she faced in her role as head of communications. Weeks earlier, her boss—the CEO—had praised her work overhauling the company's website. But then, just the day before, he had sat Laura down and told her, "I'm not sure if you're in over your head, incompetent, or both."

Laura had joined the startup two and a half years earlier, transitioning from director of public affairs for a large university to

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the faster-paced and less bureaucratic tech world. At first, she flourished as product communications manager, writing compelling white papers, implementing a dashboard to track campaign metrics, and even jumping in to field press inquiries after a major software crash affected thousands of customers. Her drive, scrappiness, and ability to motivate her team of five direct reports stood out, and within eighteen months she had been tapped to head communications for the entire company.

Laura enthusiastically stepped into her leadership role, eager to prove herself to her new boss and peers right away. Sensing that the CEO was swamped raising venture capital and not wanting to "bother him," Laura took it upon herself to redo the company's online messaging and positioning. In her product role, she had observed that average customers were turned off by technical jargon, so she decided that the company's website and all of their materials would benefit from more user-friendly language.

In spite of all her hard work and the appreciation of her peers, Laura was still adrift when it came to her boss. One day, he'd tell her the new copy she had put together was so impressive that they'd featured it in an investor pitch deck. The next, he'd question why she was wasting time on "low value" tasks instead of focusing on strategy. When Laura pinged him on Slack with questions, he'd ignore her for days, then suddenly respond with a barrage of requests. Laura felt like she couldn't get a clear read on what her boss really wanted . . . and might never be able to figure it out.

She was losing confidence in herself. Once a top performer, she now found herself totally clueless about what was required to succeed at this new level. She was putting in long hours, striving to make big changes and prove her value, yet it seemed like her moves weren't well received by the person who mattered most in her career: her boss. As she watched other senior leaders navigate their

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roles with apparent ease, she couldn't help but feel inadequate—and *really* annoyed.

Laura's not the only one. During the last few years, the number of professionals who believe they have little to no control over their careers, futures, and work relationships has doubled. A staggering 40 percent of workers grapple with a sense of helplessness. And for more than a decade, as an executive coach to professionals and leaders at some of the world's top companies, I've witnessed countless clients struggle to figure out where they stand in the workplace, a challenge that's become even more urgent and pronounced since the pandemic. These smart, successful people end up constantly questioning whether to share their thoughts or stay silent and blame themselves for missing out on opportunities because they're "not good enough." Others feel boxed in by office politics, frustrated by a lack of change, sidelined by an ambiguous decision-making process, or exhausted by miscommunication and butting heads with colleagues. Though their difficulties seem distinct at first—from "How do I get my ideas taken seriously by upper management?" and "How can I disagree with my boss without jeopardizing my job?" to "Why do I always get overlooked for opportunities despite my hard work?"—their problems often boil down to one thing: **They don't know how to manage up.**

I define "managing up" as strategically navigating relationships with those who have more positional power than you, namely your boss. It's a critical skill set for maneuvering through the complex web of power dynamics, conversations, and unspoken expectations that shape our daily work lives. The idea of managing up has been around for decades, but in a search for greater insight and innovative tools I could use in my own practice, I surveyed a diverse group of twelve thousand people and held interviews with dozens of future readers (if you were one of them, thank you!). From the

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moment the results started to come back, it was clear that most professionals know they *need* to manage up, but few know *how* to do it well. They understand that in today's workplace, it's no longer necessary to bow to their boss's every wish, but they don't know how to achieve a sense of freedom and control at work without stepping on toes.

You probably picked up this book because you can relate. Even if you have a steady paycheck, a nice title, or other external markers of success, you want *more*. Maybe you're searching for greater peace and ease in your interactions at work so you can get things done with fewer barriers and less stress. Perhaps you want a bigger say in how, when, and where you do your job and to have greater influence on the direction your career takes. Whatever it is, we're going to turn what currently seems impossible into your new reality.

In the old days, managing up equated to making the boss happy, no matter what. That meant keeping your head down, sticking to your job description, and following orders without a peep of disagreement. And let's not forget sucking up. Talk about a recipe for feeling undervalued and stuck! It's not your job, as some books and articles will tell you, to charm and flatter your boss into treating you well, read their mind when they aren't communicating clearly, or work double time to compensate for their incompetence. Some managers truly are too difficult or disorganized to have a healthy relationship with. But most of the stress and frustration that people experience with their bosses is fixable, stemming not from pure incompetence or antagonism but from a lack of awareness on both sides about how to work together effectively.

This book offers a modern, assertive approach to managing up. It's about learning how to get your needs met, whether you want approval to hire a freelancer to help finish a big project on time, the

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flexibility to work from another city, or the safety of an office environment where you're not afraid to speak your mind.

I've spent the past decade wearing many hats—therapist, human behavior researcher, executive coach. And in that time, I've helped thousands of professionals—from early-career managers to senior leaders at Fortune 500 companies—learn to navigate workplace dynamics and advocate for themselves with confidence. This book will show you exactly how to apply the principles of emotional intelligence, influence, persuasion, negotiation, and more to give yourself a competitive edge at work. After all, without understanding psychology, the workplace—and the people within it—can seem mysterious and infuriating. But once you know what makes your boss tick, you'll be able to work with them so smoothly it'll feel like cheating.

The first step is to adopt a strategic, investigative mindset. When you start to see your boss not just as a gatekeeper or an overseer but as a human being who's contending with their own pressures, distractions, and demands from higher-ups, you'll start to uncover what drives their decisions and unlock how best to communicate with them. That knowledge is key to advocating for what you need. When you can identify the fears and motivations that drive upper management's decisions, you can present your ideas and opinions to get a yes. And cracking the code on your organization's unspoken rules and norms means you can pick the perfect time to ask for more money or a promotion. Want the exact words to say in a tough negotiation or the perfect response to use when you need to push back on a project? I've got you covered. You'll see how to apply surprising, research-based strategies in ways you never thought possible, turning every managing-up moment into one that grows your confidence and advances your career.

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You might be wondering, "Why is managing up *my* responsibility? Shouldn't my manager just be better at their job?" It's a fair point—leaders definitely need to pull their weight, and organizations must make sure workplaces are good for our mental health. But here's the deal: **Managing up isn't really about making your boss's life easier. It's about taking control of your own work experience.** Think of it this way: Even if you have a good relationship with those above you, why settle for *good* when it could be *great*? Instead of seeing this process as "extra effort" or "invisible labor," consider it an investment in your satisfaction at work. Don't ask, "Why should I have to manage up?" The real question is "Why wouldn't I want to seize every opportunity to make my career better?"

The Ten Conversations

So how do you move from seeing yourself as a victim of workplace whims to someone who has the power to shape their entire work experience into one that's more fulfilling, easeful, and on their own terms? Introducing the ten conversations.

Each of the chapters ahead tackles one key "conversation" you may need to have with your manager. These aren't one-time chats but rather ongoing conversations that you'll revisit and which will evolve. Some are structured, like your weekly one-on-one with your boss or your annual performance review. Others are more informal, like a quick hallway chat with a colleague or a pre-meeting catch-up with a senior leader. But all of them are opportunities to gather valuable information, build trust and credibility, and shape how you're perceived by those around you.

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The conversations build on one another, so we'll start with the

most foundational and work our way up to the more advanced. Don't worry about memorizing the order—in real life, they'll often overlap and intersect. The key is to see every interaction, no matter how small, as a chance to put these techniques into practice and gradually strengthen your relationships.

Chapter One: The Alignment Conversation. *How do I stop feeling pulled in a hundred different directions? Why am I spending so much energy trying to decipher cryptic feedback or mixed messages from my boss? How do I know which tasks are most crucial to focus on?* I'll show you how to ask the *right* questions—ones that reveal insights about your manager's unspoken needs and priorities without putting them on the defensive. By focusing on promotable work, you can achieve more in less time, freeing up mental space and energy for your life outside the office.

Chapter Two: The Styles Conversation. *Why does my boss chase every idea that pops into her head? How come he's so short with me—does he hate me?* You'll find out how to decode your boss's communication styles and work habits so you can build rapport, quit overthinking interactions, and tailor your messages, presentations, and emails to get the attention they deserve. You'll also discover how to assert your own needs in a way that commands respect and still keeps higher-ups on your side.

Chapter Three: The Ownership Conversation. *How do I get out from under the bureaucracy or constant micromanagement that's holding me back? What can I do to present—and go after—my ideas without overstepping? If I have an idea for fixing an inefficient process or a problem that's driving me crazy, how can I get buy-in from my boss and colleagues?* Ditch the order-taker mentality and tackle the workplace issues and bottlenecks that bother you. I'll teach you how to "read the room" and accurately judge the best moments to advocate for change. You'll walk away knowing how to craft and pitch your

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proposals in ways that prompt your manager or others to give you the green light to move ahead.

Chapter Four: The Boundaries Conversation. *What do I say when my manager dumps yet another task on my plate? What if they flip out when I say no?* Discover the hidden costs of being "too helpful" and learn to push back with tact and confidence. From navigating sensitive topics to declining tasks in a way that adds to your credibility, this chapter is packed with scripts and strategies for setting boundaries that stick—even with the most demanding bosses and colleagues.

Chapter Five: The Feedback Conversation. *Should I risk saying something to my boss about an issue that's upsetting me, or should I just let it go? What do I do when it seems like my feedback to them went in one ear and out the other?* This chapter will guide you to carefully and constructively confront your manager about everything from their lack of vision to their favoritism of another colleague. I'll give you scripts and frameworks to get your voice taken seriously and specific-yet-subtle strategies to make sure your input is acted upon.

Chapter Six: The Networking Conversation. *How do I determine who, besides my boss, I should be spending time with? How do I ask for a favor or support without it feeling awkward?* We begin this chapter by identifying where key decision-makers typically spend their time and how you can naturally intersect with these spaces. You'll then learn exactly how to get influential people to say yes to meeting with you, and more important, how to ask for help in a way that feels organic and strengthens your social capital over the long term.

Chapter Seven: The Visibility Conversation. *Why does my hard work continue to go unnoticed? How do I share my accomplishments without sounding like a conceited a-hole?* Right now you may be missing out on everyday chances to elevate your reputation and attract exciting opportunities. You'll change that through the science of storytelling

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and presenting your skills and results in a memorable, authoritative way. We'll also cover how to handle credit-stealing colleagues and a manager who excludes you.

Chapter Eight: The Advancement Conversation. *How do I position myself for a promotion, bigger projects, or a move to a different team? What if my manager blocks my progress?* Even though no one cares about your aspirations more than you do, the reality is that the best way to get ahead is by aligning with what your manager wants and the organization needs. I'll show you how to make that connection, get your boss's buy-in on your plans, and navigate objections that arise along the way about your readiness, the timing, and more.

Chapter Nine: The Money Conversation. *How do I make a compelling case for better compensation? What if a higher salary isn't possible right now?* Negotiating is more than just throwing out a number; it involves a tricky dance of invisible incentives and underlying tensions. That's why in this chapter you'll find out how to gauge your worth and justify it convincingly. And don't worry if more money is off the table. You'll be armed with creative ways to get other perks that can be equally valuable.

Chapter Ten: The Quitting Conversation. *How do I know when it's time to move on? What can I do to exit on good terms?* Sometimes the best way to get ahead is to switch jobs or companies altogether. How you leave is how you'll be remembered, so I'll also walk you through everything you need to do to transition out smoothly, how to handle those awkward "I'm quitting" moments, and ways to keep your reputation and relationships glowing, even if you and your boss don't end on the best terms.

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The scripts and strategies you'll encounter will work regardless of your industry and company size—whether you're new to your job

and want to start off on the right foot or you've been in your role for years and need to reteach people how to treat you. While it's fun to mock corporate speak and workplace jargon, knowing how to craft your words in this context is key to being taken seriously. So I'll show you how to adjust your language for each conversation—when to keep it light and when to dial up the formality, how to balance sincerity with professionalism and realness with reserve. It's no secret that some workplaces and relationships are rife with bias, so we'll also tackle situations when you face inequality, prejudice, and discrimination. Throughout the book you'll hear real stories from my clients as well as insights from thousands of readers I surveyed, including through quotes at the beginning of each chapter.



You can download key takeaways, scripts, and templates from each chapter at managingup.com/bonuses.

Take Back Your Power

While I recommend following the conversations in order, feel free to jump around based on what feels most relevant to you right now. It's totally fine if you don't put every single strategy into practice right away, but if you take what you need and start making small changes today, they'll add up. As I've witnessed my clients apply what you'll learn in this book, I've seen them accomplish amazing things—earning skip-level promotions, leading million-dollar expansion projects, and receiving awards as top performers

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in their companies. But what's even more life-changing is how they reclaim a sense of agency, autonomy, and authority in their careers.

That's exactly what happened to Laura, whose story you heard earlier. Through the alignment conversation with the CEO and other senior leaders (chapter 1), she was able to ramp up her company's business-to-business messaging, including creating an enterprise demo process that helped them sell new licenses more quickly. When she got to the bottom of her boss's communication habits through the styles conversation (chapter 2), she stopped taking his brief replies personally and started getting the input she wanted by presenting findings to him in bullet points and texting while he was out courting new investors. The ownership conversation (chapter 3) helped Laura step forward with her ideas and take the reins on projects in a way others rallied behind (instead of railing against). While she still hit some rocky patches along the way, Laura's transformation was so significant that she soon became the CEO's right hand and closest advisor. A few months later, she sent me an excited email saying she was getting a hefty six-figure bonus thanks to the tangible impact she'd made to the bottom line. But even more important, she added, "the sense of assuredness I have now is priceless."

That's because, most of all, everything you'll learn in this book is going to fundamentally change the relationship you have with *yourself*. No matter what life throws at you, you'll move from a "Why does this always happen to me?" mindset to an "I've got this" attitude. So, yes, it's going to take dedication. Yes, it'll take time. But ask yourself, "Am I prepared to turn 'the way things are' into 'the way I want them to be'?" If so, then you're in the right place. Let's go.

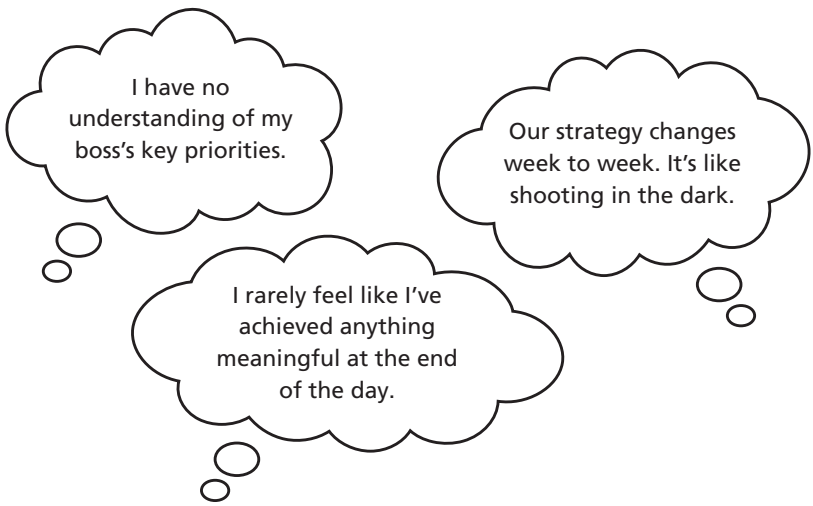
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CHAPTER ONE

The Alignment Conversation

Stop spinning your wheels and work on what really matters



I sensed something was terribly wrong when I dialed into the conference line at 8:00 A.M. and heard an unfamiliar voice. "Hi, Melody, I'm Janine. I'm with an external HR firm. Unfortunately, this call is to let you know that your employment has been terminated, effective immediately." Shock rippled through my body as my boss, who was also on the line, whispered, "I'm so sorry."

On the surface, being laid off came out of the blue. I was working in healthcare while building my coaching practice on the side. During my two years at the company, I had received positive performance reviews and was often praised for my good work. But as

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I picked up the pieces after being let go, I saw the situation more clearly. I had been hired to work on a pet project of my manager's, an innovation initiative that was outside the company's core offering. The project, while interesting, lacked buy-in from the senior leadership team and was seen as a money pit.

I was also on an island, both literally and figuratively. I worked remotely from my Manhattan apartment while the rest of the team was headquartered in Boston. Working from home—which was uncommon back then—had presented some barriers, but the real problem was that I hadn't been talking to and listening to others. If I had been, I would have quickly uncovered that my job was out of sync with the company's goals. When the time for cuts came, my role was dispensable, and I had few—if any—advocates willing to fight to keep me or have me assigned to their teams.

For years, I've kept the fact that I was laid off a secret. Competent professionals aren't *let go,* I thought, every time my mind brushed up against the unfortunate start to my life's work. What would it say about me if my colleagues and clients knew my dirty little secret? But now after working with thousands of leaders and executives across the world, I realize that what led to my unceremonious departure wasn't a failure of talent or skill. I had failed to have *the alignment conversation.*

The alignment conversation is all about figuring out how your work fits into the bigger picture and making sure you and your boss agree on what success looks like. Regardless of whether your manager is clear and forthcoming about their goals and priorities, this chapter will help you crack the code on what they *really* want. You'll also discover how to go *beyond* your boss to connect with leaders farther up the chain of command without causing drama. Any discussion of alignment would be incomplete without delv-

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ing into office politics, so I'll also show you how to map power dynamics and figure out whom you need to stay close to as well as what to do when you're at the whim of ever-changing priorities or dealing with a control freak.

If you've never broached this topic with your boss before, don't panic! Getting fired is an extreme example of what can go wrong when you're not aligned. But you probably will find yourself demoralized and frustrated if there's a yawning gap between your company's goals and what you *think* they are. Because losing your job isn't the only consequence of not having the alignment conversation. You might find yourself left out of important projects, constantly second-guessing your decisions, or continually having to revise and edit your work because it doesn't meet unspoken expectations.

The alignment conversation isn't just the key to deciphering your manager's thought processes and priorities, it's also the best—and maybe the only—way to know for sure you're making a meaningful impact at work. For example, rather than just nodding along during a project kickoff, you can ask, "I noticed that we're starting this around the same time as Y is ramping up. How do these fit together?" to help you piece together your manager's broader strategy and open the door to advocate for resources. Posing a question like "What's the dream scenario for how we handle [tricky situation]?" can reveal information your manager has about stakeholders' concerns, allowing you to fine-tune your approach and avoid land mines.

We're starting with the alignment conversation because it's also the fastest way to make every workday more pleasant—with your boss and beyond. Not only are you laying the groundwork for bigger and better opportunities (plum projects, greater visibility, more

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money!), you're also saving your sanity. No more stewing about whether you're doing a good job. Instead, you can log on to work each day knowing exactly what's expected of you, sure that you're focusing on the right tasks. No more emotional drain from doing what you *think* your boss expects, only to get it wrong and face frustration and disappointment. By having the alignment conversation, you can replace any simmering tension with a sense of shared purpose and understanding.

Cast Your One-Year Vision

Before you can align with others, you have to know what *you* want. Your one-year vision helps you identify areas where your dreams and aspirations intersect with your team's or company's goals—or uncover where they don't, which we'll deal with later in this chapter and in chapter 8, where we'll discuss turning an okay job into a great one.

So imagine yourself 365 days from now having the best possible workday. What are you doing? Who are you interacting with? What makes this day stand out and feel fulfilling and energized? Use the present tense, as if it's happening now, and describe what you're doing and how you're feeling in vivid detail. Get inspired to create your one-year vision using the following prompts:

- Think about a key relationship that could really improve your job satisfaction. How has this relationship evolved over the past year?
- Imagine you've mastered a new skill or tool that's critical for your career growth. What is this skill or tool, and how did you go about learning it?

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- Consider a key project you want to lead. What is it about, who are you working with, and what impact does it have on your team?
- Reflect on any organizational changes that you anticipate in the next year. What does it look like to proactively prepare for this?
- Envision writing a note to a mentor or colleague a year from now. What exciting accomplishments are you sharing?

Here are examples of one-year visions to inspire your own.

Resource Management Specialist

➡ *Today:* All I do is answer urgent emails from park visitors and tour companies. My relationship with my boss is tense because we're always putting out fires. We haven't had the chance to talk about my career growth in more than a year.

➡ *One year from now:* Half of my role is still dedicated to managing logistics, but the other half is focused on educating visitors about the park, which I love. Now, instead of clashing over daily tasks, my manager and I regularly brainstorm ideas together, showing how much our relationship has grown and improved.

Academic Librarian

➡ *Today:* I've thrown myself into curating special collections that highlight different cultures. While students and faculty appreciate my efforts, my initiative seems to be ignored and undervalued by our administration.

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➡ *One year from now:* I've been tapped by several professors to integrate our special collections into their curriculums. The dean's chief of staff even invited me to sit on our university's advisory board for undergraduate engagement because of my willingness to go above and beyond.

IT Manager

➡ *Today:* I'm known as the "cloud maestro" because I excel at large-scale tech integrations. But I keep hitting a wall due to a lack of buy-in from higher leadership, leaving promising projects in limbo.

➡ *One year from now:* I'm able to build relationships and a strong coalition with our head of product and head of marketing. They trust me enough to influence our VP to green-light our largest implementation ever, touching ten thousand customers and earning me a promotion.

We'll come back to your one-year vision several times over the course of the book, so you'll get a chance to tweak and refine where you see yourself heading. Even if your goals feel out of reach, don't shut down possibilities just yet. Give yourself permission to dream.

Get in Your Boss's Head

Your boss is busy, and they may not always be forthcoming about what's most important to them, so it's on you to ask the right ques-

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tions to get what you need. Research from Harvard Business School finds that the simple act of asking a question drastically increases likability and rapport. Choose a few of the questions below to try in an upcoming one-on-one or to weave into conversation. Approach your boss's answers with curiosity. The questions you ask should never feel like an interrogation or take up hours of their time.

To Identify Their Goals and Pressures

- What goals are the most important to you and why are they a priority now?
- What are some of the metrics your own boss discusses with you and how are they calculated?
- What keeps you up at night when thinking about our team or projects?
- What emerging trends should we be mindful of and potentially capitalize on?

To Define What Success Looks Like

- How do my responsibilities and tasks contribute to the overall success of the team/department/organization?
- How am I being measured when it comes to meeting these goals?
- What does good performance look like? Great performance? How can I exceed your expectations when it comes to deliverables and output?

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- In terms of impact and value creation, what would you like to see me accomplish in the next three, six, or twelve months and why?
- What assumptions or misconceptions about success in this role do you think should be addressed?

To Clarify Priorities

- What do you wish you had more time to work on and/or what's one thing I could do that would make your job simpler?
- What actions or changes would allow you to look back in ninety days and say, "Wow, that really made a difference"?
- This is how I'm spending my time. Are my priorities consistent with yours? What would you like me to change to support you better?
- We have multiple priorities, so I'd like to understand how X compares to other tasks on my plate. Are there any areas where I should focus more or less?

If it's your first time bringing up the topic of alignment or the relationship with your manager has been rocky, it might feel weird to both of you if the discussion comes out of nowhere. So try one of these scripts: "I'd like to make sure we're on the same page when it comes to our priorities. Chatting about this would help me better understand what's top of mind for you." Or "I've been thinking about how to make sure that what I'm working on supports our

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overall goals. If I understand your vision and expectations, I can accomplish even more and we can avoid miscommunication."

Dig Deeper

A good question doesn't always lead to a helpful answer. Bosses, like everyone else, can be vague, unclear, or brief in their responses, especially if they're caught off guard, are in a rush, or haven't thoroughly considered the topic before. For example, when Rebecca, a financial advisor, asked the firm's partner about goals for the next quarter, he bluntly said, "Growth is our focus. Period." Even though Rebecca was rattled, she took a deep breath and probed further. "I'd like to have a clearer understanding of how we measure growth so I can work toward the right outcome. What benchmarks would signify progress?" As her boss revealed more, Rebecca continued asking, "And what else?," which gave her the details she needed to move forward. Notice that Rebecca didn't ask why. She saw that her boss was already defensive and asking why could have caused him to feel attacked or as if he had to justify himself, which wouldn't have been great for either of them.

Another strategy I often recommend comes from one of my favorite books, *Never Split the Difference.* Former FBI hostage negotiator and author Chris Voss recommends mirroring or repeating the last few words your counterpart says to encourage them to reveal more detail or depth. For instance, if your boss says, "We need to focus on improving our customer service scores this quarter," you might reply, "Our customer service scores?"

"Yes, it's essential," your boss goes on. "Our recent feedback shows that our customers aren't fully satisfied with our response times."

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