# Managing Upwards Training for Managers and Professionals

## Might your need to be more successful at managing upwards be met by this management training course called Skills with People?

### Yes if you agree with any of the following

* I realise one of the most crucial people for me to manage successfully is my boss.
* I'm much better at dealing with people below me than people above me. Unfortunately my boss has little first-hand experience of how well I deal with people in my department, only of how I deal with him or her, and that's often not very effectively.
* If only I could treat my boss as an equal, but the trouble is I often feel intimidated in the presence of senior people, and then I'm not at my best.
* When senior people ask me a question I feel in a panic and tend to dump information on them as fast as I can. I've noticed they're sometimes impatient with me or give me a glazed look when I do this.
* When my boss asks me how I'm getting on I feel under great pressure to say 'fine', even when things are not fine.
* My manager is often abusive. I'd dearly like to know how to stand up to this without putting my job at risk.

### What you'll take away from this course

A simple but powerful set of skills with a very wide range of uses. One of the most valuable of these is managing your boss. The skills you need to manage upwards are no different from the ones you need for managing downwards or sideways, but they're even more crucial. When it comes to getting the best out of people, bosses are no different from anyone else. The approaches that get the best out of other people get the best out of bosses, too. The main difference is that we tend to be more afraid of them than we are of other people.

### ****What this session will do for you****

In this session we'll aim to give you something practical you can use right away that'll help you handle a difficult situation more successfully at work. All you need do to **prepare for this session** is think about the kinds of situations you want to be able to handle more successfully.

## How the skills you'll practise on this course will make you much more successful at managing upwards

There are two crucial skills you need for managing upwards successfully. One is listening with empathy. The other is speaking assertively. We'll help you master both of them on this course. Here are some examples of situations where these two skills can help you be much more successful at managing upwards.

### Example 1 - Getting a busy person's attention

When people are busy it can be difficult for them to switch from what they're doing and pay attention to you. Here are two approaches, the first without, and the second with empathy and assertiveness (empathy and assertiveness are the two core skills taught on the Skills with People course). Imagine the BUSY PERSON in this conversation is your boss:-

#### First approach - without the two skills

YOU:  Excuse me, could I see you for a minute?  It’s urgent.

BUSY PERSON:  I’m rather busy right now.  Can’t it wait?

YOU:  Afraid not.  Sorry.

BUSY PERSON:  Well, all right.  But be quick.  I must get on with this report.

Yes, he has agreed – but reluctantly, and you therefore have only half his attention. The other half is still on the report he's writing. He's understandably on the defensive, protecting his time from your intrusion. That's because you appear to be aware only of your own needs. You showed no awareness of or concern for his needs, you gave him no time to let off steam and mentally adjust, and you weren't honest about how much of his time you needed.

#### Second approach - using the two basic skills

YOU (using empathy):  I can see you’re busy.  I don’t imagine you it's a good time to be interrupted.

BUSY PERSON (feels his time is being respected and so he can let off steam):  True!  I’ve got this report to get out.  I’m up against a deadline.  What is it?

YOU (being assertive - which doesn't mean being aggressive - it just means being honest and matter-of-fact about what you need):  I need to talk – urgently.

BUSY PERSON:  I see.  How long will it take?

YOU (clear and definite):  Ten minutes.

BUSY PERSON:  Okay.  Just let me finish this sentence, and I’ll be with you.

Now when he is ready you're much more likely to have his full attention.

#### Summary of the method

* Always start with empathy, e.g., “I can see you’re busy. I don’t imagine you want an interruption.”
* Wait for him to let off steam.
* Then be clear and assertive, e.g., “I need to see you, urgently.  It’ll take … minutes.”
* Wait for him to register your need and give you his attention.

A combination of these two skills is so powerful and hard to resist that it works irrespective of the relative status of the person you're dealing with.  It's a very effective way of managing upwards.

### Example 2  Saying what you want

Many of us learn very early in life that it's unfair, rude, and perhaps punishable to ask for what we want, because it might clash with or deprive someone else of what they want. This may have been part of the necessary and well-meant social training provided by our carers when we were little. But many of us have taken it to mean that it's safer to keep quiet about what we want, and this has become one of the underlying beliefs that have shaped our personality, our relationships, and the way we handle our bosses. In order to avoid conflict we've acquired the habit of suppressing one of the most vital and empowering questions we can ever ask: “What do I want?”

But that early lesson in life was wrong. Provided we also consider what others want, asserting what we want usually works very well. Saying what we want does not mean we are insisting on it. It simply means we are putting it on the table for discussion. If there's a clash of needs, we can either discuss how to divide up the limited resource, or – even better – create a way to both have what we want. Provided our aim is to satisfy one-another’s needs as much as our own there's no conflict and the conversation can be harmonious. This works as well with bosses as with anyone else.

This robust but harmonious way of negotiating about what we want is made possible by using empathy and assertiveness together.  Using this approach in the conversation with your boss, you'd say:-

* “I want to persuade you to say yes to an idea of mine.  Of course the decision is yours, but I believe I can convince you, and I'd like to try.”

He's very likely enjoy your frank approach and allow you to try. From this point onwards the main skill you need is not beating him over the head with the advantages of your idea, but showing how well you can understand his reservations, in other words, listening with empathy. If you can satisfy him you understand his reservations, and allow him to let off steam about them, he'll begin to be receptive to your idea.

### Example 3. Receiving criticism without being defensive

Most people experience criticism as a personal attack even when it's not meant that way, and have a strong instinct to defend themselves. This is the hardest of all situations to handle gracefully. But reacting in a defensive way to criticism always raises the tension, because it fails to take the criticiser’s underlying concern seriously, and therefore makes him feel even worse about you. It therefore diminishes you in his eyes. An un-defensive response, on the other hand, has the opposite effect. It increases your stature in his eyes and enhances the relationship. And far from showing submission, it actually shows strength.

Another thing to bear in mind is that much of the criticism you receive is false. A common reason why is given below. An understanding of this can help you stand firm and not submit to it. What you need is a way of being firm yet un-defensive in the face of false criticism. This

might sound like a lot to ask for, but, as we'll see shortly, a combination of empathy and assertiveness places it within your grasp.

Of course some of the criticism you receive probably is true, and you need a graceful way of responding to this, too. You also need to be able to tell the difference between true and false criticism.

Imagine someone senior in the hierarchy says to you`;-

* “Judging by the performance of your team it’s obvious you are completely lacking in leadership ability”.

Which of us, on receiving this, would not experience a rapid increase in blood pressure?  Not only is it a heavy blow to our self-esteem, but it also threatens our reputation and career prospects.

But hold on.  If instead of panicking we examine it closely we can see in it a number of very interesting things:-

* It is so sweeping and unhelpful a generalisation that it's meaningless.
* Because it's so unhelpful and so general, it's the kind of thing no confident leader would say.
* On the other hand it's precisely the kind of thing that would be said by someone who secretly feared that he himself was lacking in leadership ability.
* So why does he say it? The answer is that by pointing an accusing finger at someone else he can get relief from the self-critical voice inside his own head. This process is well known, and we all do it – it is called projection, or scapegoating. We see in others the very qualities we're trying to deny in ourselves. We attack them because at some level we feel this absolves us from an attack we secretly fear we deserve. Most of the time we're not aware we're doing this. But even though – or perhaps just because – it goes on beneath the surface of the conscious mind the impulse to do it is very strong.
* Therefore destructive personal criticism usually says more about the person giving it than about the person receiving it. But if such criticism so clearly deserves to be dismissed as false, why are we so easily hooked and disturbed by it? The reason is that we too have an inner critic. The criticism we hear from others seems to confirm the truth of our own worst fears and self-criticisms. Of course, it's all highly irrational and really deserves only our laughter, but we take it seriously and feel drawn to it as to a magnet. This is one of the universal frailties of human nature.

But although seeing negative personal criticism for what it really is can help us be less disturbed by it, we still need to respond in an effective way. So let's return to the example and see how we might respond with a combination of empathy and assertiveness:-

SENIOR PERSON:  Judging by the performance of your team it’s obvious you are completely lacking in leadership ability.

YOU (listening with empathy): You seem to feel very bad about my team’s poor performance.  I imagine that’s because it could reflect badly on the department as a whole.

SENIOR PERSON (spontaneously lets off steam, calms down a bit and feels a little less vitriolic):  Exactly!

YOU (now being assertive – frankly telling the truth about how you feel and the reason why):  I feel undermined when you say I’m completely lacking in leadership ability.  Of course I’ve a lot to learn, but I too feel bad about my team’s performance, and I’m trying hard to improve it.

SENIOR PERSON (taken aback by your frankness he backs down; his respect for you rapidly increases because it is obvious to him that no-one who was totally lacking in leadership ability would be able to stand up for themselves in the way you're now doing):  Okay, sorry, perhaps I misunderstood.

YOU (continuing to speak the simple truth):  If you have a specific criticism of how I'm managing my team I'll be grateful for it because I'm very keen to improve.

SENIOR PERSON (may be unable to respond to this because he may not have anything specific to say; if he does you can only gain by it): …

Your integrity is intact. You've stood up for yourself under severe attack with both courtesy and grace. You've acquitted yourself well and have gone up in his estimation. What has enabled you to do this is a combination of empathy and assertiveness. Your empathy opened his mind. Your honest assertiveness brought him to his senses.

### But what if the criticism you receive is valid?

Of course, if it's skilfully given it won't be so difficult to receive, but if it's given insensitively or aggressively you may still have a problem receiving it without becoming defensive. The example below is of receiving valid criticism undefensively:-

BOSS:  This report is far too long.  The MD will be much too busy to read it.

YOU (reeling from the unexpected criticism - and admitting frankly how you feel and why):  That hurts!  I’ve been working on this round the clock!

BOSS:  What counts around here is how smart you work.

YOU:  Are you saying it’s total rubbish? If not, can you give me a clue what’s wrong with it. I'm very keen to get my proposal accepted.

BOSS:  There’s nothing wrong with the idea, but you're swamping us in detail. The MD just won’t have time to read it, so it’s a waste of time.

YOU:  Oh (thinking hard). I’ve got it. I’ll write a clear summary at the beginning.  Do you think that will make a difference?

BOSS:  Yes.

HANS:  I should have realised. Thanks for pointing this out. I’ll do it right away.

### What's the problem about manage upwards?

The underlying problem is fear, and how easily we let it inhibit us.

There are two practical questions here. One is - can you do anything about the fear, apart from honestly admitting it and learning to live with it? The other is - can you learn how to behave in more impressive ways even when you're afraid?

In the Skills with People course we encourage you to focus mainly on the second question. In other words, we help you find impressive ways of dealing with your bosses even when you feel intimidated. Of course as you do this your confidence increases and you begin to feel less afraid, but you don't need confidence to start with.

### What not to say to your boss

When your boss asks how things are going, don't say everything's fine if it's not. There are better ways of managing upwards. Imagine what you'd be thinking if you were the boss and received this answer. You'd be thinking, "But can I trust this person - isn't he/she just saying what he/she thinks I want to hear?"  On the Skills with People course we'll coach you in how to speak the truth and be respected for doing so.

## Yet more reasons why you might benefit from this training in managing upwards

* I need to give thought to managing my boss better.
* Perhaps I need a different way of giving him support, handling his feelings, answering his questions.
* The impression I give him, or the effect I have on him, matters for my career.
* I need to know how to stand up to him, listen better to him, understand him better, be more honest with him, and respond to criticism from him with a more open and receptive mind.
* I would like to be able to deal with my boss with total integrity.
* My boss is no different from other people. I need to use the same skills and care in handling him as I do in handling customers.