

Demystify the boss

Good working relationship starts with learning who that person really is

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For *ajcjobs*

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A little mystery can add spice to a romantic relationship. At the office, mystery can be disastrous.

Whether you are new to the company or suddenly find yourself with a new boss because of a merger or other shift in the workplace, the last thing you want to be saying at the end of the day is, "Who is this guy?"



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Tamara O'Neill, president of Careers on Course, discusses marketing strategies with her communications specialist, Bill Spiers. O'Neill said employees can understand their bosses better by paying attention to their communication styles and looking for clues in their office decorations and body language.

Bosses come with different personalities, and it's to your advantage to understand yours.

"You always want to try and know your boss, to understand his expectations and management style," said Sally Jamara, a Traversa Consulting partner who holds a doctorate in organizational psychology. "You need to know how best to communicate with him, what decisions he wants to be involved in.

"The more you know, the more effectively you can work together and help the organization be successful. You have different roles and may think in different ways, but you want to be heading in the same direction."

Employees who don't understand their bosses and spend time battling them are using up valuable energy. They aren't thinking about what their customers need or what the competition is doing.

"The competition in business should be external, not internal, but we're all human, and conflicts and misunderstandings happen," Jamara said. "That's why we believe the process of on-boarding [the orientation process used to bring new hires into an organization] is so important."

Traversa consultants assist companies and individuals in meeting their strategic objectives, including helping organizations develop effective strategies for bringing in new executives and employees.

"Many companies say that they have an on-boarding process, but it's often no more than a series of 'meet-and-greets' with key employees and customers," Jamara said.

She proposes a better way. If a company has brought on a new boss to drive change, why not have him meet his new team in a half-day, facilitated discussion? The new boss introduces himself and then leaves the room so that the facilitator can ask the employees specific questions that the boss has helped create. For example, what has the team heard about him? What does he need to know about the team? What are the key objectives to meet? What are the obstacles and problems to be solved?

The boss comes back in to hear feedback from the employees and to answer questions.

"This method allows the boss to learn about the new culture. It gives him critical information to make decisions and get involved quickly, while it gets the team engaged and invested in the boss's success," Jamara said. "There is always a lot of anxiety and fear surrounding a new boss. The faster you can alleviate stress, correct misconceptions and get everyone focused, the quicker everyone can be productive. It's important to start well."

If there is no prescribed mechanism for on-boarding, a new hire can create his or her own process by scheduling time with his or her supervisor and other key people in the operation.

"This is the time to be as open as possible, to observe how things happen and to ask for feedback. We learn from both positive and negative feedback. If we reject negative feedback, we miss a great opportunity to learn," Jamara said.

Ask your boss what she needs from you to be successful and how she views her leadership approach. Listen to what is said and how it is said. Ask peers about how work gets done, when things are due or how information is shared, and confirm what you find out with your boss.

"You're getting the lay of the land, and your tone should be that you are seeking to comprehend, not judge," Jamara said.

Soon, you may bring in new ideas or make changes, but initially your role is to absorb everything you can about your boss, your co-workers and the company culture.

"Starting out on the job is the time for asking, not telling," said Tamara O'Neill, president of Careers on Course, an Atlanta consulting company that coaches executives through career searches and transitions. "Demonstrating that you can listen and learn is more important than showing how smart you are early on."

O'Neill advises clients who have secured new positions and are moving into new environments to do four things:

1. Build a trusting relationship with your superior. "Different people like to be approached in different ways. Some want formal reports; others want informal information," O'Neill said. "Ask how you can help your manager be successful. What defines success in this role, and what has worked or not worked in the past?"

"Then demonstrate that you'll do what you say, and deliver. That will begin to build a bond."

Notice how your boss communicates with others and how he conducts meetings. How does he dress or decorate his office? A big desk with trophies displayed may mean that your boss likes having power, competing and winning. If he comes from behind his desk to meet you at a conference table, he's showing a willingness to collaborate.

"It's very important to be observant. Some bosses will be transparent and tell you how they like to work; others you will have to figure out," O'Neill said.

2. Start to network. Find out who are the key resources and experts in the organization, and get to know them. Start building your own team of advisers and go-to people.

"You will need a coalition of people to help you get things done," O'Neill said.

3. Learn about the company. "Understand its history, culture, challenges and goals so that you will know what capabilities you will need to develop" to do your job and help your boss, O'Neill said.

Knowing what has gone before will help you define a path for future success.

4. Work on securing early wins that will matter to your manager. Ask your boss what key initiatives should be done.

"You want to talk about those things in the beginning and make them a priority. It's important to build relationships and to start accomplishing tasks that need to be done in order to be successful," O'Neill said. "The First 90 Days: Critical Success Strategies for New Leaders at All Levels' [by Michael Watkins] is a great book on this subject."

One way to find out what matters to your boss is to apply the pleasure/pain theory, which often is taught to salespeople, said Myra McElhaney, an Atlanta corporate trainer, speaker and writer, who often helps clients understand workplace relationships.

"The idea is that people are motivated by the avoidance of pain and the seeking of pleasure," McElhane said. "If you can figure out what people fear and what they desire, it helps your relationship."

Because most businesspeople won't tell you what they fear, it's best to ask questions such as "What is your biggest concern about this project?" and "What is your best-case scenario for this situation?"

"If his fear is that the work won't be completed on time, you can give him regular progress updates," McElhane said. Doing so will increase his sense of security as you both move forward.

In her corporate work, McElhane often uses the DiSC and other behavioral assessment tools to help workers understand themselves and their co-workers.

"If you understand the DiSC four basic behavioral styles and know that most people are strongest in one or two of them, you can look for visual and verbal clues to better understand your boss," she said.

For example, if your boss is animated with facial expressions and gestures and walks fast, he is more likely to make quick decisions based on his instinct.

If he is more deliberate in speech and movement and pauses before answering a question, he is probably more detail-oriented and values accuracy. "He may prefer things in writing and to see a spreadsheet to document what you are telling him," McElhane said.

Notice your boss's office: Does it have personal mementos of his hobby or family pictures? Or is every piece of paper lined up, and nothing is out of place? Are there books? Asking about personal items or books in a nonthreatening way can open the door to conversation and insight.

"Listen carefully to the questions he asks and what he says," McElhane said. If they are very precise questions, he wants specific information about results.

Analytical types prefer facts, figures and accurate data. For example, instead of saying "it was a great week," tell the boss that sales were up by 23 percent.

"Generally, the way someone communicates with you is how he prefers you to communicate with him," McElhane said.

Why does it matter? Because, no matter how different you are, employees and bosses need to cooperate to meet individual and company goals.

"Understanding is the foundation of how you're going to work together," O'Neill said. "It sets the tone for how you will get things done."

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