

Career Path: It’s Good to be the Boss!

Career Development



There are lots of reasons why it's just great being a senior manager. Here are a few common ideas people have about the benefits that come with the title:

- "Finally, I'll be able to just **make decisions** myself, without having to worry about what my boss or others think."
- "Ah, I can't wait to have **authority to implement** my priorities. People will have to do what I say!"
- "People will **listen to me** and respect my opinion because of my position. No more fighting for attention."

My more experienced colleagues are no doubt laughing out loud right now. Or at least ruefully shaking their heads. And for good reason.

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Of all the things that come with a promotion and a senior title, the one you should spend the most time contemplating is this: **responsibility**. To make decisions is to have responsibility for the outcomes your team achieves. To exert authority to implement decisions is to bear responsibility for the resources your team expends. And to command authority by virtue of your position is to be responsible for what you say in every setting.

And that's assuming you actually are free to make decisions, exert authority, and have your opinion heard. Let's explore the real world of your work environment for a moment.

Freedom

As a senior manager, you are *never* free of others' expectations when you make decisions. You may be the senior-most legal officer, sure, but you still are bound by fiduciary responsibilities and must interact collegially with your other management peers. Your tenure will be brief if you are oblivious to the toes you step on when making decisions. Not to mention the CEO and the board of directors are looking over your shoulder at every step. (Lest you think there is yet a higher level at which you are ultimately free of such expectations, the CEO bears the cross of the board, and the board members ultimately answer to shareholders.)

Authority

So if you are not really free to make your decisions without considering the context, your fiduciary duties, and your various stakeholders, can we at least grant that you are much better positioned to *implement* your decisions? To this, let me simply ask "Have you ever observed a parent interacting with a cranky toddler in a store?" The parent clearly has all the structural authority in the relationship. They can direct the outcome by force. Yet witness how often the child prevails.

And before you blame this on poor parenting, turn now to your workplace. Can you think of a time that you yourself defied or ignored a company policy because it did not fit reality, was poorly designed, or just plain "stupid"?

One of the things I liked most about working at a company with lots of engineers and scientists is that they are logical and methodological. If you can explain the reason and the rationale for your proposal, they will be faithful allies and excellent partners.

Now instead try to force such colleagues to implement your policy just because you say so and see what happens. Your work colleagues have improved upon the tricks the cranky toddler employs to such great effect. If you try to force them to your will, you will meet with noncompliance that makes your hair prematurely gray and fall out.

I recently came across a line Desiderius Erasmus wrote in a letter to Sir Thomas More in 1521. The context was Martin Luther's agitation that led to the Protestant Reformation, and whether Church authorities should permit debate or force adherence to the current doctrine: “It is no great feat to burn a little man. It is a great achievement to persuade him.”

What was true 500 years ago is still true today: You must persuade, never dictate.

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Being heard

And to our final point, will you have authority by virtue of your position? Will people listen to you as a result of your role? Here I can give more positive news. Yes, they will, at least at first. For them to *keep listening*, you must do both of the following: You must yourself listen carefully and ask relevant questions to tease out the real issues, for the full set of issues is rarely contained in the initial request. Then you must provide pragmatic advice that demonstrates you understand the context and have placed the company's interests first.

In other words, you have to be good at your job if you expect people to listen to you. Your position just gets you the first "at bat." Everything after that is up to you.

It is unquestionably good to be the boss, because it puts you in a position to influence your company. But if you take your job seriously, you'll soon see that little comes with the title beyond the responsibility to live up to others' expectations.

I am confident you can do it. In fact, I expect nothing less.

Be well.

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