

NO NONSENSE ADVICE

14

THE FINE ART OF SUCKING UP

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PROLOGUE:

A Hazard Warning : NOT Kissing Ass can be injurious to your Health

At almost every single one of our Leadership programs for young Executives, we get into the rather 'thorny' issue of getting promoted. We often realize that many are rather 'naive' about the ways of the world : and those who are not, are actually rather conniving and devious, only set out to do 'whatever it takes' to get ahead. Sadly, there don't seem to be enough in the 'middle' who see things for what they are : and understand how to navigate this rather shitty landscape in order to get to the 'promised land' of a promotion.

Bottom line: Organizational Politics exists. Favouritism exists. Nepotism exists. The world ISN'T fair : so, what's new ? : That's the way it has ALWAYS been - and possibly always WILL BE ! The question is whether you WANT to play that game - or not : now THAT is a personal decision and you have to live with the consequences. We are not here to pass judgement either way : merely to help you IF you choose to be a pragmatist rather than an idealist.

Be warned though : being 'liked' is actually quite an essential skill no matter which organisation you work for. Whether you wish to call it EQ : or 'Soft Skills' or anything else rather fancy : the bottom line is: being 'liked' matters. This is NOT to say being liked is ALL there is : rather : being LIKED IS important to begin with... No matter how good you are : if you are disliked by the majority of people around you, and your bosses too : the chances of you climbing the corporate ladder are quite slim.

The question is this : do you need to 'suck up' to actually be 'liked' and 'trusted' : and our genuine belief is this : it's just a play on words - some see it as sucking up : some see it as genuinely helping. The fundamental variance is this : your INTENTIONS. If you are purely selfish in this : and you are doing it purely to advance yourself : then, chances are, it IS kissing ass : and nothing more. However, if you are genuinely trying to help : others may see it as kissing ass : but, over time, you will be seen to be much more : which is the ultimate purpose of the book.

So, read with care... Appreciate the subtle nuances. Life, and work, are a lot more 'complex' (NOT complicated - complex) than simple black and white values and ideals...

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Chapter 1

Understand WHY you need to Kiss Ass

How others see YOUR relationship with your superiors is almost irrelevant

Understand this : your stakeholders matter. Your superiors, your customers, your peers, and your subordinates are ALL your stakeholders! However, ultimately, one of the fundamental relationships you need to sort out is that with your superiors: unfortunately, most generally have an adversarial relationship with their superiors. This is where the problem lies : the moment you start being 'good' with your bosses, the others around you see it as 'kissing ass' and this makes it 'undesirable' because it hurts your ego to accept it.

Whether you are kissing ass or not is a matter of perception: so, be clear that what you are trying to do is to build a healthy relationship with your superiors: and if the others see it as kissing ass - so be it - let it be - we will look at how to change that perception later on. NEVER get swayed by what others around you feel: but don't be naive about it either. Remember: 'currying favour' with your boss is essential, initially: once you have established trust and confidence, then, and only then, will you be able to really challenge your superiors one on one.

Don't be naive - understand the world for what it is

Bottom line: your superiors are the gatekeepers to your progress.

Without their nod of approval, there is NO CHANCE of getting promoted. Now, maybe you think getting promoted isn't the be all and end all of your existence in the workplace: and there is no arguing about that. However, sooner or later you ARE going to feel left out: and then it's a little too late. So, don't be naive: understand the world is NOT governed by your particular set of rules. Learn to navigate the realities: so that you may establish your own foothold in the organisation and its ranks.

You exist to make sure your boss succeeds: never forget that

Ultimately, you exist to make sure your boss succeeds. Your boss exists to ensure the organisation succeeds.

Don't ever complicate it beyond this.

If you accept this simple reality, life becomes exceedingly clear: and dead simple. DO EVERYTHING IN YOUR POWER to ensure your superiors do well. Forget the credit: forget the glory: forget the ego. Bottom line: if the organisation succeeds, everything else is possible: conversely: if the organisation is going down the gutter, your promotion is the least of the issues!

Ultimately, remember that you NEVER get promoted if your superiors think you are against them

Promotion goes beyond simply achieving objectives. Yes: that is a prerequisite for sure: but it isn't the deciding factor. The deciding factor is whether or not you are trusted: completely. You cannot be trusted if you are not seen to be 'in their corner.'

So, be clear that, at least initially, you need to go out of your way to establish that bond and that relationship.

Chapter 2

Learn HOW to Kiss Ass

Understand how your superiors want things done

Each boss is different. Trying to compare one against the other and pass judgement is as absurd as comparing partners and asking your current partner to do things the way your former partner used to (needless to say you won't last too long !)

Learn the little idiosyncrasies of your superiors. Learn to anticipate what they would want. Learn to know HOW they want certain things done. Learn to understand what pisses them off. Learn what times of the day they are most 'at ease' in: and when they are generally in a bad mood.

Your bosses are also human: don't make the mistake of expecting them to be enlightened saints!

Be flexible

NEVER be rigid about how you want to do things. Be flexible. Bosses often change their minds: be patient with these situations. Things DO change: and there are enough instances where bosses don't have the time to really tell you the entire story. Trust your bosses to 'know better' and be flexible enough to accommodate their requests.

Remember : you don't have to always AGREE : and it is ok to agree to disagree. The important thing is this : if they want something done, even if it is INCONVENIENT to you, they must know you will not say 'no' - nor do a half-hearted job of it.

Be reliable

Always be reliable. If your bosses turn to you to get something done, be it big or small, don't ever let them down. Always ensure to deliver. Find ways of getting it done.

Like in any other relationship in your life, trust is key. Once your boss learns to trust you, he or she will begin to rely on you more. Being someone your boss can rely on will certainly go a long way, and will help your bond better.

Don't approach this in a lazy manner. Be involved in the task given. Be committed to getting it done.

Remember: if they have given it to you, they are depending on you to deliver. Show them that you can be reliable. Show them that you can be dependable.

Be loyal

Loyalty is a rare commodity. Trust me, it is highly valued. Never leave room for your loyalty to be questioned. Always be upfront with your boss. Be transparent.

Keep you boss posted at all times. Make sure they hear it from you before they hear it from others. Let it be known by all, that you are loyal to your boss.

Work hard and consciously at keeping that reputation. Don't ever speak ill of your boss to anyone. Always stand up for your boss .

Go out of your way - do something more

While you will be tasked with many things that can be done normally, there will be instances where you will have to go out of your way to get something done. Do it!

Don't hesitate! Go that extra mile : go out of your way to get something done for your boss. While they may not show it, they certainly will appreciate it.

Don't worry about what others are saying or thinking. You are genuine and that's all that matters.

In fact, do more than what is expected.

Genuinely care

Whatever you do, make sure you are genuine. Don't let what others say, think or do affect you : be genuine always.

Always be sincere and genuine about your support, advice and actions. Don't ever do it for the sake of doing it. Being authentic in everything you do : that's all that should matter.

Don't ever do something half-heartedly. It will show, and you will lose whatever credibility you have built.

Make sure your boss does not make stupid mistakes

Quite often we put our bosses on a pedestal...then we expect them to be like God. Remember they are just as human as you and I. They make mistakes too...even silly ones!

Your job is to ensure that your boss always comes out looking good...and do this genuinely.

This is a matter of your organisation's wellbeing and your own integrity. So you do need to speak up. While this may sound risky, remember if you don't speak up, you become part of the problem and the outcome.

However, the way to approach your boss is be respectful, graceful and humble. Ensure your boss does not lose face. Get your timing right.

Always bear in mind the end results, so that you can respectfully explain this to your boss and prevent him/her from making that mistake.

Take the blame on behalf of your bosses

Since they are every bit human like us, it is possible that at times their actions may end up putting us on the spot with their bosses or the organisation.

While it is easier to turn around and point the finger back at your boss, it is a lot harder to sit tight and take the blame. However, if you look at the long term benefit, you will see a different picture.

Make sure that you tell your boss, privately and in a calm manner, at the right time, the real story...so that they know where you are coming from. If you are genuine, your boss will understand and respect you for taking the hit.

On another note, it is also a sign of good leadership, where leaders take the blame and pass the credit. You have now effectively demonstrated additional leadership skills, which will also be seen by your bosses.

NEVER talk ill of your superiors - in any forum

A part of being genuine is being transparent and honest. Your integrity is part of your brand and reputation.

If you are genuine in your actions with your superiors, you will not speak ill of them at any given point. You will always protect them and be respectful.

True, they are imperfect and they will make mistakes. But who are we to judge? If we are part of the team and are team players, then we must demonstrate respect and professionalism. Talking behind your boss about his/her weakness and or mistakes is clearly not a reflection of professionalism.

Even if others are putting their bosses down, you should either walk away or tell them to stop. However, never get dragged into that conversation and talk bad about your boss in front of anyone.

Your relationship must be strong for you to be able to walk up to your boss and tell him he/her, the real situation.

NEVER pick battles with your bosses in public

Keeping quiet in controversy is important - so that your bosses never lose 'face' in public. There is a fine line between agreeing and keeping quiet : and you need to draw that distinction. NEVER get sucked into contradicting or going against what your bosses have said in public : EVER when put on the spot !

Here are some easy ways to get out of 'speaking your mind' if someone asks you DIRECTLY what you think - and you are put 'on the spot' :

- Ask for time to think about it
- Ask for time to look at the 'evidence' carefully
- Ask for time to 'do my own research'

This is NOT to say you AGREE with everything your boss says (we have this covered later) : it is merely knowing not to put your boss (and yourself) in an awkward situation in public.

Of course : if you have a wide-open organizational culture, this becomes irrelevant : for sure : but then again, if that were the case, you would not have picked up this book in the first place !

Keep your bosses posted - without resorting to gossip

Always keep your boss posted...regardless of the information being positive or negative. If you hear something directly and can confirm the information, keep your boss informed. Don't let your boss hear it from other sources.

Make sure that your info is accurate and verifiable. Remember not to carry false tales or gossip. Don't go with the 'he said, she said'... because if your boss believes that story and takes it to his peers, it will make him/her look bad and cause embarrassment.

Don't ever GOSSIP ...Always be well-informed...research the content and make sure you blend in.

Chapter 3

How to Kiss Ass **WITHOUT** kissing ass

Gain a reputation as a stellar performer who can be trusted

Reputation is everything inside an organisation : as it is with life. Gain a reputation for being a stellar performer who constantly outperforms : and soon no one will be bothered whether you 'kiss ass' or not : as it becomes irrelevant. NEVER leave room for :

1. Underperformance

2. Being reminded : always keep everyone posted if you are going to take longer to do something or are unable to deliver on a promise.

3. Only the work your boss gives you to be done : and not do other things promised : this is where resentment about your 'kissing ass' comes from. So, give the same focus and energy to ensure EVERY ONE'S tasks are completed.

4. Being selfish : and doing work at the cost of others : in that, not supporting larger initiatives and ONLY looking at your work portfolio

5. Being a snob - and being unhelpful : and not teaching others - or being arrogant about your skills and performance. Always teach others.

6. Using company resources for personal gain : or for your tasks at the cost of others. Make sure you are absolutely clear about what your resources are and NEVER stretch it to engulf others' resources.

Gain a reputation for being a true PROFESSIONAL in everything you do : and soon enough, you will gain respect and confidence of all : not only your superiors.

Pick battles in private : and hold fort

Pick your battles with your superiors. Make your voice heard : and also, call out those 'obvious' mistakes they will make - which they are blindsided to. Superiors often don't see ground realities : and this is NOT their fault : the more senior they become, the more they depend on others to 'see' on their behalf : which is where you come in. We DID tell you not to 'contradict' your boss or go against him/her at a meeting : but, you MUST pick these battles in private. Hold ground. Get them to see the ills of their ways : the negatives they DIDN'T consider : or ground realities which may be completely different to the perceptions they hold. YOU are responsible for making sure your bosses make the right decisions : and this WILL necessitate tough conversations.

1. NEVER be rude : never be disrespectful
2. Go with facts, figures and solid arguments : not laments and emotional appeals
3. Think through all angles : go prepared for the questions they will pose and the challenges they will make to your line of thinking

The key is this : you must NEVER be just a 'yes man' (or woman !) You MUST have your own opinion : your own thinking and your own options.

'I told you so'

Invariably you will have enough situations where your superiors DON'T take your input into consideration and do what they want to do.

Support this fully : because that is your responsibility and duty. However, when things DO go south, it is time for another private chat.

NEVER overuse 'I told you so' : it becomes a nag and something very negative. However, carefully placing 'I told you so' to make the point that your superiors CAN and WILL be wrong is important : to establish the fact that they need to pay heed to your (and others') opinions and inputs when making important decisions. Remember : failure means failure for all : not just your bosses : and this is something you may need to impress upon them. The key is this : they must understand that 'we are all in this together' - and that they are NOT alone : either in success or failure.

'I told you so' is NOT a snigger or a proverbial 'salt in the wound' : it is an honest conversation about owning up to the realization that your boss has a team : and that they have his/her back at all times : and to give the team the chance to advise and guide them in the right direction.

Help take out red tape from your unit

Most departments have inherent bureaucracy and red tape.

Actively work to break these shackles and open the department for transparent and easier work methods. This enables other units to be able to work with your unit better : faster : and with more fluidity. This in turn makes a huge impact in increasing overall organizational performance and agility : a cornerstone of a successful organisation.

Spearheading work transparency wins trust and confidence from the wider organisation : which helps see beyond 'sucking up' and 'getting promoted' and enables you to have a reputation as a 'leader' and not just the 'blue eyed boy' : and this makes all the difference.

Help other departments

Most departments have times of crisis. Be the first to volunteer help in these circumstances and get your bosses' support to get your entire unit to help out as well.

These 'acts of kindness' go a long way in smoothing relationships, fostering goodwill and above all, demonstrating: 'we are one team' (rather than it being simply embroidery on your company T Shirt !)

This too goes to demonstrate that you are not as shallow as people say you are : and establish much needed credibility and trust across the organization.

Help put the entire company 'on the map'
Look at avenues for the overall organisation to be 'out there'

- A. Actively seek awards the organisation can win
- B. Look at journalists who may be interested in writing about what your organisation is doing
- C. Take on speaking engagements on behalf of the organisation in industry and professional forums : better still - get your bosses the opportunity to showcase their work in wider forums
- D. Actively look at CSR opportunities and creative engagement with the wider community
- E. Encourage the organisation to pick up a cause they believe in

As the organisation grows in stature, you will realize that many will see your input and 'hand' in it. This enables you to move beyond a silo or a department and become an 'icon' the overall organization acknowledges. The fact that you 'kiss ass' becomes absolutely irrelevant at this point.

EPILOGUE

Kissing Ass is not all there is...

Kissing Ass is a derogatory term : but a statement of fact too. You either do it - or you don't : either way, there is a negative. If you don't - it becomes exceedingly difficult to really win the confidence and trust of your superiors in the short term : and if you do - and do ONLY that - you lose credibility in the long term.

The KEY is this : to be able to NEVER resort to 'sucking up' merely to get promoted : but to establish trust and confidence : so that your loyalties are never ever questioned. Remember always : this is NOT the be all and end all of it : establishing credibility is FAR more important : but, not establishing the trust and confidence of your immediate superiors is a definitive first step. AFTER you establish this trust : go out of your way to demonstrate skill, competence, talent and performance : as well as your leadership potential - not only to the bosses : but to the wider organisation.

Kissing Ass only gets you so far : and if that is the ONLY skill you have - make no mistake - you are doomed to fail in the long term !

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Anton is a multi-faceted professional who has had over two decades of hands on experience in process improvement, change management and strategic management. As the former AVP at HSBC DPL Anton won accolades for his superlative work there: and won the prestigious HSBC Group Service – Global Talent Management Member two years in a row. Anton currently works as a consultant focusing on efficiency and productivity improvement and process optimization for local and regional Clients.