



My Manager Doesn't Like Me...

by Yvonne T. Ryan,
The Techie Leadership Coach

Do you and your manager find yourself at odds with one another on a regular basis, or as a result of circumstances seemingly beyond your control? One of my clients recently remarked during a coaching session, "My manager doesn't like me." Since I know this individual to be a very likable person and generally not a whiner, this statement came as a surprise and prompted me to investigate further.

In this particular case, my client (let's call him "Bob") was offered a desirable promotion, not by the person who would be his immediate supervisor (let's call him "Sam"), but rather by Sam's boss (an Executive VP). Although Bob (in the new position) was to report to Sam, the Executive VP had apparently not consulted Sam about Bob's appointment until after the offer had been made and accepted. Clearly, this set the stage for resentment and resistance on the part of Sam. In addition, Bob determined immediately that he and Sam have entirely different management styles which put further strain on their already tenuous relationship.

This scenario exemplifies the value of building and nurturing relationships up the chain of command in a number of ways. Firstly, the fact that the EVP wanted Bob in the new position in the first place indicates management's confidence in Bob's abilities to handle the responsibilities and challenges of the position. Although there may have been other political reasons for Bob's appointment, this appears to have been the primary reason for the EVP's actions in this particular case. In short, Bob was seen as the best candidate for the job. Had Bob, his past work, and the work of his prior team not been visible to the EVP (either personally or by reputation), Bob would likely not have been considered for the new position.

Secondly, the actions of the EVP put Bob and Sam in very awkward positions at the start of their relationship. Whether or not Sam would have chosen Bob to fill the new position, given a range of candidates, became moot once the EVP had made the appointment. Sam was bound to feel resentful at the rather high-handed manner in which the appointment had been made. What is Sam to think? Is Bob some sort of spy for upper management? Has Sam lost face or influence in the eyes of the executives above him, and will Bob have more political clout than Sam does? Why was Bob's appointment handled outside normal channels?

Granted, this is a unique and somewhat rare case. However, it still demonstrates how easy it is (even with the best of intentions) to reach a crossroads in a relationship before it even begins to build momentum. From a day-to-day perspective, the EVP is effectively no longer in the equation. Bob and Sam both have choices as to how they develop their working relationship. They can individually and collectively choose to collaborate with one another based purely on guarded trust (giving each other the benefit of the doubt) until they have a chance to mesh their perspectives and styles (best case). Or, Sam could allow personal grievances to overshadow their interactions putting their budding relationship firmly in an adversarial mode right from the start (worst case).

In this situation, I advised Bob to be immediately proactive. I reminded Bob that he could not be fully effective in his new position if he does not have Sam's support. The EVP made the appointment, but Bob must deal with the fallout. Therefore, Bob and Sam need to have a very frank conversation (or series of conversations) about where Bob's loyalties lie (presumably with Sam's organization), and about how they want to work together — leaving the EVP and his rather high-handed actions out of the discussion as

much as possible.

Sam needs to be assured explicitly that Bob is committed to supporting Sam and being a full participant and contributor on Sam's team. In other words, Bob needs to tell Sam this explicitly rather than assuming Sam knows it. This is also not the time for Bob to push his own agenda like a Sherman tank. Bob can still be assertive about new ideas and new approaches, but he must employ tact and a certain amount of sensitivity toward his Sam's perceived fears and needs. Bob cannot force Sam to accept or trust him, but Bob can give Sam every opportunity to do so based upon Bob's behavior.

Executives operate and survive (or not) in a very political arena. They must believe they can trust their own people. So Bob must demonstrate, via his decisions and actions, that he is trustworthy. We'll cover the details on how to build trust in another issue, but for now, let's say Bob's best approach is to be like water wearing away at the stone of Sam's resistance. The more Bob creates opportunities for he and Sam to collaborate, and the more Bob aligns his plans with Sam's agenda and expresses himself in terms of Sam's goals, the more likely Sam will be to let go of any overshadowing concerns or resentment. Then, Bob and Sam can begin their journey toward becoming a successful management team rather than becoming adversaries in an armed camp.

If you find your relationship with your own boss to be strained, consider the recommendations I made to Bob:

- Remember: You don't have to like each other to work together successfully. The key ingredients to a successful working relationship with your manager are mutual respect and trust.
- Always make building trust a top priority. A relationship without trust is doomed to failure.
- Invite your boss to collaborate with you whenever possible. If s/he resists, be persistent, like water wearing away stone.
- Don't be combative or competitive even when your boss chooses to be so. Be like the water that flows around, over, even under the stone. Look for ways to accomplish your intentions that do not challenge your manager's authority or sense of self-worth.
- Talk to your manager in terms of his/her objectives and how your efforts will help solve your manager's problems. If your manager feels you are aware of and focused on his/her needs, your manager will be less suspicious of your motives; s/he will feel more in tune with you and your efforts (and the efforts of your team).
- Keep your manager informed, even when they don't seem to care. The last thing you want to do is upstage your manager or blindside your manager in a meeting — especially a meeting involving the executive staff.
- Help your manager look good. It may seem unfair (especially if you think your manager is an idiot), but it is essential. When you (and your direct reports) make your manager look good, your manager has every reason to give you what you need. If you make your manager look foolish or bad (even if s/he has it coming), you and your group will be the ones who ultimately suffer for it. Don't worry, the people above your manager will eventually catch on to the true state of affairs as long as you take steps to remain visible and keep the accomplishments of your team visible. If they don't catch on in the near term, you still have choices!

About the Author: *Yvonne T. Ryan, The Techie Leadership Coach and founder of Leader's Edge CA, provides practical coaching and education to technical professionals seeking to improve their leadership skills and advance their career through innovative programs like "Techies on the RiseTM."* Her particular focus is on middle management and team leadership." Visit her Web site at: www.leadersedgeca.com.

Article Date: June 11, 2007