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Managing Your Administrator

by C. W. Von Bergen,
Barlow Soper,
and Jane W. Licata

As teachers and other education workers, we most often think of our administrators managing us—and not the other way around. We accept downward management—teachers direct or manage students and classrooms. We also readily recognize that we must concern ourselves, to a degree, with the management of peer or collegial relations (horizontal management). However, few workers consciously recognize or accept that we also must manage our administrators.

Through upward management, we build relationships with our administrators that result in mutual success: being listened to and having our ideas respected; getting our questions answered in a timely fashion; and having the kind of influence that helps us accomplish our educational tasks. It also means helping compensate for our administrators’ weak points. Everyone has them. Administrators may not be assertive enough, or they may be too assertive. Administrators may not be organized or may be obsessive/compulsive. Administrators may know pedagogy or organizational skills but have weaknesses dealing with people, or vice versa. When we can help fill in the weaknesses, we get more of what we want, need, and deserve, and so do our students and administrators (Dobson and Dobson 2000).

No doubt, some educators will resent the suggestion that, in addition to their other duties, they must expend more time and energy managing their relationships with administrators. Such teachers and others fail to realize the importance of this activity and how it can simplify their jobs in the long run, by eliminating potential problems. Effective workers recognize this function as a legitimate part of their jobs; they must establish and manage relationships with everyone on whom they depend and interact—including administrators.

Contrary to what some may think, we are not talking about political string pulling, apple polishing, or upward nuzzling. Nor are we suggesting manipulation, outfoxing, or doing end-runs around administrators. Upward management is not “bossing the boss.” Rather, we use the term “managing” to refer to methods of working with administrators to ensure benefits for our students, our schools, and ourselves as well as for our administrators. Forget ambition, promotion, raises, and the currently popular catch phrases in your system, district, or state. Just think of education and how to be effective at it.

How do we get the needed resources to support student programs, information, advice, or required consents to do our jobs and keep going? Answers to this question often point toward whomever has local power and influence or possesses leverage—that is, one’s first-tier administrator/supervisor. It may be a principal, assistant superintendent, curriculum supervisor, or
grade-level chair, depending on circum-
stances. To fail to make this relationship one
of mutual respect and understanding is to
miss a major element in being effective.
Essentially, we are suggesting that educa-
tors ask if we are doing enough to ensure
that our upward relations are strong, sup-
portive, and facilitating. Are they perceived
that way by our supervisors?

**WHY MANAGE OUR SUPERVISORS?**

Some things we do directly benefit su-
pervisors, while others profit us. Ulti-
mately, meeting administrators' needs help
both, and in so doing assist everyone within
the educational system, along with exter-

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Administrators, like all humans, need
contact, support, encouragement, recogni-
tion, and attention. Help meet the admin-
istrator's needs as a person. Positions of
leadership can be very lonely, yet those who
hold them require understanding and sup-
port, like anyone else.

Administrators may be very able and
intelligent but cannot know or do every-
thing. If they could, there would be no need
for anyone else on the payroll. Therefore,
try to bridge the gaps in administrators' ex-
periences. Ensure that they profit to the
fullest from your talents and expertise. Fur-
thermore, administrators appreciate pre-
vention of crises before they arise—and ef-
forts to contain them if they do. Help keep
them out of trouble. Again, your percep-
tion and know-how can minimize the un-
expected and the problematic.

It is not easy to work with administra-
tors anxious about their status or situations
in the educational system. Help make the
administrator successful. Administrators
who "look good" are better able to make
valuable linkages between the school, re-
source providers, and community groups.
They do not want your job. Increase the
confidence and trust your administrators
have in you. This, in turn, will help
strengthen your relationships with them.

Educators need influence with admin-
istrators to ensure that we have resources
needed to get things done easier, quicker,
and with greater efficiency. You may desire
a hearing for a program or curricular idea
for improving classroom learning or man-
agement. You may need a greater share of
the budget, new equipment, or more space.
The likelihood of any of these happening
is directly related to how influential you are
with your administrators.

We can control, to a certain degree, our
career development. Rare is the assignment

to special positions or roles for those perceived as not being "on-the-team." Administrators must have a few trusted team members sensitive to the administration’s needs. In turn, trusted team members are often the ones administrators choose for key positions, such as lead or coordinating teacher, curriculum supervisor, or grade-level coordinator.

Based on intensive examination of effective supervisor-subordinate relationships, Gabbarro and Kotter (1980) have suggested several highly relevant behavioral guidelines. First, make sure you understand your administrator, including:

- your administrator’s goals and objectives;
- the pressures on him or her;
- your administrator’s strengths, weaknesses, and blind spots; and
- his or her preferred work style.

Second, assess yourself, including your own strengths and weaknesses, personal style, and predisposition toward dependence on authority figures. You should also develop and maintain a relationship that:

- fits the needs and styles of both of you;
- is characterized by mutual, clear expectations;
- keeps your administrator informed;
- is based on honesty and dependability; and
- effectively uses your administrator’s time and resources.

**The Administrator as Individual**

Focus on the administrator. Are you aware of his or her unique needs as a person, leader, and manager? Consider specific leadership and operating styles. What is the administrator’s operational style? Are you aware of common differences in style and how you interact with this administrator? Does he or she display a preference for reading and writing memos, or are face-to-face contacts preferred? Does he or she favor exhaustive memoranda or a brief note? Is the administrator a morning or afternoon person? Does he or she prefer personal interactions to be formal or informal, quick or extended? What are his or her likes, dislikes, and pet peeves? What are the administrator’s objectives, interests, hopes, fears, aspirations, anxieties, and motivations? What about tolerance for and response to surprises? What procedures or practices are favored? Is he or she a detail person or a “loose,” relaxed operator? Does he or she work rapidly or slowly? Does the administrator prefer to initiate activities, or can others? How important are deadlines? What is the typical response to bad news? Is the administrator a planner, risk-taker, initiator, or responder? How does he or she respond to change, suggestions, and criticisms? Is he or she predictable?

If you understand the administrator’s style and needs system, you are in a good position to cope with and adjust to him or her. For example, assume the administrator is a very busy person and has difficulty focusing. You may find it difficult to interact privately long enough to resolve important matters. What can you do? You have tried setting up appointments, but he or she is generally harassed by phone calls and visitors and cannot give you undivided attention. You know that he or she is a late-afternoon person and prefers working after 4 P.M., even though the office is empty at that time (or, perhaps, because of that). Though we may not particularly want to get involved in lengthy discussions at that hour, it may be the best time to discuss more involved issues or present an idea for consideration.

**The Administrator’s Job**

Another key point in managing your relationship with administrators is to understand the job better. Have you thought seriously about your administrator’s posi-
tion, what it is really like on a day-to-day basis? Have you considered the demands it includes, time spent in various meetings, and efforts devoted to addressing complaints? Have you considered to what extent your administrator really is his or her own boss? Also, consider areas in which he or she needs assistance. Your administrator may not meet your standards for the ideal supervisor, but have you attempted to enter his or her world sufficiently to understand the job requirements, anxieties, pressures, problems, and resources? If not, you probably will be unable to help your administrator meet his or her job or personal needs.

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Your Needs

Given an understanding of your administrators’ needs systems and leadership styles, along with an appreciation of his or her responsibilities, you must be sensitive to your own needs system and operating style. Recognize where you can and cannot mesh your needs and work styles with those of your administrators. For example, if you enjoy receiving praise for significant work accomplishments, but your administrator is stingy in doling out such rewards, anticipate that your need for praise will not be satisfied very often, at least not at work. This may represent a constant source of irritation and frustration. Thus, you may have to find other ways to get emotional payoffs, either from other sources within the educational system or via participation in professional organizations, serving on or chairing professional committees, and/or through involvement with civic, church, or other groups. It may also be productive to engage in some soul-searching concerning your attitudes and behaviors. Certainly, all of us may feel at times like we have not been empathetic enough in our understanding of the administrator’s situation and how our actions work at odds with those needs.

Building A Relationship with the Administrator

Your effectiveness as an educator may be no better than your relationship with your administrator. A solid relationship can foster success with assignments, tasks, and responsibilities. You must actively cultivate and maintain the best possible interactions with your administrators. Healthy relationships do not occur by accident. This is as true with administrators as with family members and friends. Solid relationships must be worked at from the beginning and maintained vigorously.

The best way to get along with your administrator is to start by identifying his or her strengths. Granted, sometimes the administrator can make this difficult. He or she may try to control every minute aspect of educational functioning or act in a devil-may-care manner at times. In certain areas, he or she may resist some of your best ideas or not be available as much as or when you would like. Yet everyone—yes, even the administrator—has certain relative strengths. Why not actively look for and identify those strengths and appreciate them to the fullest? They may more than compensate for weak or less attractive traits. Too often, we focus on the negative. This is easy to do with friends, family, colleagues, and students; it is sometimes even easier to do with administrators.

Remember that administrators also...
desire praise. Your administrator’s supervisor is likely very busy and may be of the “old school,” having neither the time nor the inclination to give positive attention. So, if it is to be, it is up to thee. You work closely with this administrator and know of his or her accomplishments, so why not provide some applause when merited? It may seem awkward at first, but, after a few times, you will be able to do it with minimal self-consciousness. Try not to pile it on, though. Keep it short, simple, and specific: “I thought your talk to the parents last night went well. I particularly liked your statement about everyone pulling together.”

Yet praise should be earned and given when deserved rather than out of habit. Pats on the back could be regarded as insincere flattery. A good opportunity to provide praise is when the administrator is particularly helpful. With luck, you may anticipate a by-product from your positive reinforcement; the administrator may come around and start passing some back to you. Also, he or she may be delightfully surprised to get compliments rather than the usual litany of complaints.

Consider the following example, which combines acknowledging compensating qualities and rewarding positive actions of a principal. A teacher colleague of ours has an overextended principal who wears several hats in the school district and practically abdicates her responsibilities, insofar as our colleague’s work is concerned. What makes up for this perceived shortcoming is that the principal very actively supports our colleague in her decisions. For this teacher, such a characteristic is highly valued. Because the teacher appreciates this quality, she lets the principal know, not once a year but as often as is appropriate, in the manner suggested above.

Can we think like administrators? You do not need to march in lockstep with his or her fife-and-drum, with a resultant surrender of your own uniqueness and creativity. Instead, put yourself into his or her shoes. If you can think like the administrator, you can do a better job of giving him or her solid assistance. Your administrator should then place greater trust and reliance on you, which can go a long way toward improving the quality of the school culture.

Another relationship building activity is respecting the administrator’s time. Whether it is a memo, a one-on-one meeting, a report, or something else that consumes time, recognize that the administrator has no more hours in the day than you. In fact, he or she may have less discretionary time because of a greater number of meetings, appointments, field visits, and other assorted demands from his or her supervisor and others. We are frequently as unaware of others’ time investments as they are of ours. So plan accordingly. Prior to any meeting with an administrator, know what must be said or covered. It helps to take notes or develop an outline to keep things on track and moving. Try to schedule meetings so they fit into a workable time frame for all concerned. If you have a significant amount to discuss, there is no point meeting with the administrator just before he or she has to leave for a staff meeting. Observe body language—paper shuffling, glancing at the clock, and fidgeting are signals that the meeting should be wrapped up, postponed, or rescheduled. If you have more to cover, suggest a later follow-up meeting, ideally at a specific, mutually agreed upon time. Then leave!

Not all children learn alike. Some grasp information better by reading, while others learn through listening or in a hands-on fashion (Willis and Kindle-Hodson 1999). The same holds true for adults. Management guru Peter Drucker (1999) divided supervisors into “listeners” and “readers.” Some administrators prefer getting infor-
information in report form so that they can read and study it. Others work better with information presented in person so they can ask questions.

Consider former president Lyndon Johnson. He destroyed his presidency, in large measure, by not knowing that he was a listener rather than a reader. His predecessor, John Kennedy, was a reader who had assembled a brilliant group of writers as his assistants, making sure they sent him memos before discussing their issues in person. Regrettably, Johnson kept these people on his staff and they kept writing. Apparently, he seldom understood what they were conveying. Yet, as a senator, Johnson had been superb, for parliamentarians have to be listeners.

Few listeners can remake themselves into competent readers or vice versa. Listeners who try to become readers tend to suffer the fate of President Johnson, and readers who try to become listeners suffer similarly. They seldom perform or achieve at their best. The implication is clear. If your administrator is a listener, brief him or her in person, then follow-up with a short memo. If the administrator is a reader, cover important items or issues in writing, then discuss them in person. Effective workers adopt the work style that best fits their administrators.

Other means exist to encourage effective communications. Chances are, your administrator seldom likes surprises except on his or her birthday and at Christmas. Other than these times, keep your administrator fully informed as to progress and problems to avoid embarrassment for either of you. Often, we are better off if relevant bad news comes directly from us instead of from a parent or other "outsider." There are three advantages to this approach. First, it demonstrates our candor and cooperation. It also makes certain that the relevant facts come from the one who ought to know the most about the circumstances surrounding the event (Knippen, Green, and Sutton 1991). Finally, it strengthens linkages between the school and parent groups, because parents may come to perceive the administrator as being "on top" of the situation.

When communicating with the administrator, try to present possible solutions to problems, or at least options, rather than merely point out difficulties or complain. We know a superintendent who consistently asks those principals who come to him with problems or complaints to present him with tenable solutions as well. Consequently, his staff arrives having given thought and consideration to the issues, and they are unlikely to "dump" problems or complain. Most administrators value such initiative in their workers, but they vary considerably in how they distinguish between initiatives that support their work and suggestions that may appear dictatorial. You are not likely to endear yourself to administrators by going into the office and offering suggestions in the following manner: "You have a problem, and here's what you ought to do about it." A better approach might be: "I've given this considerable thought, and if you agree with me then perhaps we may want to do this."

It is also important to develop a workable set of expectations with the administrator. Developing understanding requires that you communicate your expectations to the administrator, find out if they are workable from his or her perspective, and then influence him or her to accept the important ones. Being able to influence the administrator to value your expectations can be particularly important if that individual is an overachiever. Such administrators often set unrealistically high standards that need tempered. Along this line, it is important not to overcommit.
You must be trustworthy and maintain credibility. Say what you will do, and then deliver as promised. Few things are more disabling to an administrator than a worker who cannot be trusted or is undependable. A commitment to an optimistic delivery date may please the administrator in the short term but be a source of displeasure if not honored. It is difficult for administrators to rely on workers who repeatedly miss deadlines. “Better late than never” is inappropriate; frequently, late is just as bad as never. Without a basic level of trust in a worker’s word, the administrator may feel that he or she must check all of that subordinate’s actions, which further strains the working relationship. Worse yet, this may generalize to the work of others. The principal may start to distrust others, even those who consistently perform well.

A final point about communication relates to convincing the administrator of a certain course of action. Talk about the direct, concrete benefits of the proposal, idea, or recommendation—not simply how something would be good for you, students, or the system. Show the administrator the payoffs for him or her. Marketing experts know this tactic, and practice it religiously. You must be other-directed and let administrators know “what’s in it” for them. Also, communicate active involvement with accomplishments, taking into account any work performed by the administrator, along with support and resources supplied. Do not say passively, “The reading project was done two weeks before the deadline” or “I finished the reading project significantly ahead of time.” It is better to say, “I’m really pleased we’ve completed the reading project already.”

**Dealing with Incompetent Administrators**

Occasionally, you may encounter a less-than-able administrator. Though you could wait and hope that his or her supervisor will replace that administrator, you would lose valuable time and energy that could have improved the school culture or classroom learning. Furthermore, some less-than-able administrators can outlast the most tenacious supervisors. We have identified some of the more common types of less-than-able administrators, offering suggestions for helping them become more competent.

**The Unorganized Administrator**

A messy, poorly organized supervisor loses memos, forgets to keep appointments, ignores agreed-upon priorities, and gives involved assignments on short or no notice. He or she suddenly cancels staff meetings and is unpredictable. One way to deal with this administrator is to enlist his or her secretary to organize the administrator’s life. However, for this approach to work, you will probably have to show the secretary how it will be in his or her best interest to exert the time and effort. Also, try to engineer an off-campus team-building session for you and colleagues to let your hair down appropriately about the administrator’s organizational issues. Try to get some relief and formulate possible options to help the individual change.

**The Overly Zealous Delegator**

As educational workers, we want our administrators to delegate to us with considerable freedom and few strings attached. If, however, we are given full responsibility with minimal guidelines or expectations, we may be faced with murky, impossible tasks. The best strategy may be to confront your administrator politely with the fact that you cannot do the superb job expected, though you would like to, without more specific guidelines, expectations, and deadlines. Persistence until you both clearly understand the task is critical. It is not unusual in these instances to find that
the administrator was as foggy on what was expected of you as you were.

**The Wishy-Washy Administrator**

You may have an ineffectual administrator who tends to get lost on minor tangents. A good strategy with this person is to give him or her the most important question or issue to resolve first. In this manner, minor areas of concern will not be as apt to sidetrack. You must be willing to come back to the original issue in discussions, but do so in a pleasant, non-hostile manner: “I think we have gotten away from what we need to do about this situation.” Persistence and polite assertiveness, not hostility, are frequently key qualities.

**The Perfectionist**

We have seen several perfectionists in administrative positions. This type of administrator has an unstated but ever-present rule: “Nothing can move, because nothing is perfect.” If you cannot live with an endless stall, you must help the administrator decide and act. Assure the person that it is time to let go. The completed job looks great (or at least appropriate and adequate), and there is little risk in moving ahead. After convincing the administrator that the greater risk may be in inaction, praise the administrator for decision-making, even if the results are less than perfect.

**The Fire-Fighter**

If you have an administrator who seems to thrive on rapid movement, chaos, and pandemonium—everything is urgent and should have been accomplished yesterday—your challenge is to slow him or her down and help in planning. We recommend using the team approach, letting the administrator know that everyone is experiencing severe job anxiety and that with a plan, preferably written and specific, things will get done better, more efficiently, and with higher morale. You must offer concrete examples of how planning is superior to turmoil.

**The Procrastinator**

An administrator’s delaying on some matters may negatively impact your other responsibilities. Your best strategy is to shake up the principal a bit by communicating that, if you do not get going on the specific activity, the administrator’s supervisor will jump all over him or her and you will all look like a bunch of amateurs. Another way to jar this stalling administrator into action is to give him or her a memo with a “time bomb” attached to it: “I’ll go ahead on this unless you tell me otherwise by the 30th.”

**Helpful Attitudes and Behaviors**

If you really want to impress administrators with your attitudes and behaviors—that you care about them as persons, their concerns and priorities, their job successes, their “looking good,” etc.—read and mark the items in the “Managing Your Administrator Questionnaire—A Self-Quiz” (see Table 1 on pages 78–79). This inventory summarizes the guidelines discussed in this paper and, if honestly completed, will give you a good idea of those behaviors and attitudes that must be changed or further developed to manage your administrator more effectively and enhance your current job effectiveness and subsequent career development.

**A Proactive Path**

For maximum results and job satisfaction, educational workers must be proactive and take responsibility for managing relationships with their administrators. As Covey (1989) stated the first habit of “highly effective” people is to be proactive. Proactive individuals identify opportunities, show initiative, take action, and persevere until they bring about desired change. They are pathfinders (Leavitt
who identify and solve problems, taking it upon themselves to impact the world around them, including their work environment.

Nonproactive people exhibit the opposite patterns—they fail to identify, let alone seize, opportunities for change. They are more passive, reacting and adapting to rather than shaping their environments. These people show little initiative and rely on others to be forces for change. Circumstances must be endured rather than confronted. When asked about their jobs, they often reply with how long they have until retirement, much like convicts talk about time until parole or release.

### Table 1

**Managing Your Administrator Questionnaire—A Self-Quiz**

The statements below describe administrator-worker relationships from the standpoint of managing the administrator. Read each statement carefully, and provide a letter grade for the item according to the scoring guide. Be honest in your responses, and think in terms of how your administrator would see a particular attitude or behavior of yours.

**Scoring guide:**

- **H** = Your attitude or behavior is healthy and facilitating.
- **I** = Your attitude or behavior could be improved upon.
- **N** = Your attitude or behavior is negative (non-facilitating) in character.
- **U** = You are uncertain how to label a particular attitude or behavior.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>H</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>N</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I know precisely what my administrator expects of me. If at any time I'm unclear, I can get clarification of goals and procedures from the administrator.</td>
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<td>2. I understand my administrator's job, pressures, schedule, deadlines, and priorities.</td>
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<td>3. I recognize that my administrator may have a broader view of a problem that I do.</td>
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<td>4. I operate on the assumption that my administrator doesn't like surprises.</td>
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<td>5. I try to keep my administrator out of trouble.</td>
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<td>6. A key role of mine is to help my administrator succeed.</td>
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<td>7. I operate so that my administrator gets co-credit for my accomplishments.</td>
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<td>8. My administrator sees me as a reliable person. My administrator knows that I will carry through on all assignments.</td>
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<td>9. I make no promises that I cannot fulfill.</td>
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<td>10. I always provide my administrator with completed work.</td>
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<td>11. I have developed a habit of saying: &quot;If I don't know, I'll try to find out.&quot;</td>
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<td>12. I avoid using jargon my administrator doesn't understand or words that may raise a &quot;red flag.&quot;</td>
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<td>13. I operate so that my administrator sees me as a key resource and thus taps my expertise regularly.</td>
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<td>14. I use my administrator fully as a resource.</td>
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<td>15. I show my administrator how he/she will personally benefit from any proposals or projects that I initiate.</td>
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Such workers may view administrators as all-powerful and themselves as weak and ineffectual, even helpless. Often, they fail to realize that they too, even in this state, bring something to the vocational environment and that administrators need their support and cooperation to do their jobs more effectively. These workers sometimes refuse to acknowledge that administrators and work settings can be severely wounded by their actions or inactions. They fail to understand or do not care that administrators must rely on cooperation, dependability, and honesty from subordinates. Many educational workers do not recognize that their relationships with their administrators and work settings can be severely wounded by their actions or inactions. They fail to understand or do not care that administrators must rely on cooperation, dependability, and honesty from subordinates. Many educational workers do not recognize that their relationships with their administrators can be severely wounded by their actions or inactions.

16. [ ] I maintain regular contact with my administrator so that he/she knows that I'm active, available, interested, and eager to assist, and that I'm generally a "good worker."
17. [ ] If my administrator is wrong, I don't hesitate to tell him/her. I do this by presenting facts while showing respect for his/her opinion, approach, perspective.
18. [ ] I seek and offer help so that my administrator sees me as an ally.
19. [ ] When I recognize that my administrator is determined to proceed in a particular direction, I avoid prolonged debate to advance my viewpoint.
20. [ ] I support and carry out my administrator's decisions even if I may have reservations about them.
21. [ ] If my administrator is not ready to decide something, I readily go along with his her deferral.
22. [ ] I operate so that I conserve my administrator's time.
23. [ ] When I "goof," I candidly let my administrator know it. "Cover-ups" are not part of my style.
24. [ ] I expect my administrator to critique my work. I see that as a way to grow.
25. [ ] I don't take my relationship with my administrator for granted. I constantly try to improve on it by giving information, support, appreciation, and praise.
26. [ ] I show my administrator a high degree of respect—for his/her ideas and also as a person.
27. [ ] I never communicate to my administrator that he/she is not a bright person.
28. [ ] I make it a point to never bad-mouth my administrator.

When you have completed marking all the items concerning your attitudes and behaviors, tally the scores for each letter grade and enter your scores here:

H for healthy [ ]
I for improvement warranted [ ]
N for negativity [ ]
U for uncertain [ ]

You now should know where and in what ways you should make changes in your attitudes and behaviors to be more effective in managing your administrator.

administrators involve interdependence. Some may see the various suggestions in these pages as helping the administrator manage us, and not the other way around, but remember that the two are inextricable. By supporting our administrator’s interests and goals, by showing ourselves to be team players, we build the trust and mutual respect needed to get the support and decisions that advance our work, projects, and certainly careers. Along with this personal win-win situation, our primary task, the quality education of our students, is advanced.

Does your administrator need managing? The answer is certainly yes. In the words of Peter Drucker (1988, 47), world-renowned leadership expert, “You don’t have to like or admire your boss, nor do you have to hate him. You do have to manage him, however, so that he becomes your resource for achievement, accomplishment, and personal success.” Consider a “small wins” approach (Soper, Von Bergen, and Sanders 1996). Select one or two areas you want to change and work on them consistently and conscientiously; be realistic and do not expect overnight miracles. You can manage your administrator.

References