

Supervise Your Supervisor

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For so long, “managing up” has felt like a couple of dirty words when discussing supervisor/supervisee relationships. We pretend there isn’t a finesse to managing our supervisors, or it’s disrespectful to acknowledge they need managing. Managing up doesn’t have to be patronizing or unkind. There’s no need to pretend supervisors have the onus on them to do the work in these relationships, while supervisees sit back and enjoy (or despise) the ride. By taking more responsibility, supervisees can take control of their work experience.

There has been a lot of talk about folks in this profession creating a reality where every two years they want to leave or move, doing a disservice to their students and supervisors. But, what if, these professionals took control of their own supervising? What if they asked for what they needed and taught their supervisors how to manage them? What if they gave their managers the tools to assist them in the ways they need to be supported? The potential for managing supervisors, increasing job satisfaction, and decreasing attrition, in this profession, is huge.

The AFA Core Competencies (Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors, 2018) can help accomplish these goals. If you make yourself comfortable discussing this foundational knowledge and these professional skills, they can guide your conversations with your supervisor and support endeavors to manage up. These competencies aren’t built for new professionals or seasoned professionals; they are built for all-levels of professionals, and the competencies provide a common language for engaging with your supervisor about your working relationship.

Whether it’s owning your strengths in **Governance**, but acknowledging your area of opportunity in **Fraternity/Sorority Systems**, or imbedding your expertise with organizational conduct into conversations about **Student Safety** and **Student Learning**, while asking a supervisor about their experience in **Program Administration**, this tool can be used for so much more than an evaluation of where you’re at or where you want to go. It can even be used to figure out how to work more cohesively as a team. Once you figure out cohesion with a supervisor, there’s opportunity to do the same with other colleagues.

Now, all of this comes with the caveat that not every supervisor will be open to “being managed.” But, like any relationship, communication is needed at the core of a supervisor/supervisee partnership. If fraternity/sorority advisors are going to expect students to have the courage to confront and hold one another accountable, there’s a need for us to be able to do the same with supervisors and other colleagues as well. Calling a supervisor in or out is as crucial as being able to call a student in or out.

So, how do you do this?

- **Learn to listen and communicate.** In *Crucial Conversations*, Patterson et al. (2012) talks about the need to recognize what makes you violent and silent. In short, they challenge readers to know what sets them off or what shuts them down. Usually, one of these happens because someone doesn't feel safe, appreciated, or trusted. For some, this may be as simple as a supervisor offering words of affirmation after a big event. And maybe, you need the space to share your feelings and frustrations before getting down to business. Conversely, your supervisor may have similar needs. They may show trust by throwing you in the deep end and asking you to swim. Or, they may build trust by expecting you to make them feel needed. Your supervisor doesn't know what you need unless you tell them. You won't know what they need until you ask. If you expect your supervisor to treat you the way you want to be treated, you should expect to do the same. And, you'll need to teach one another how.
- **Acknowledge strengths and weaknesses.** Notice your supervisor's strengths and weaknesses; ask about them. Find the gaps that need to be filled and fill them where you can. Leverage your supervisor's strengths and ask them for help in their areas of expertise. If your supervisor is a pie-in-the-sky, big idea person, know how to bring them down. Don't crush their dreams but know how to break down big ideas into smaller digestible opportunities. If your supervisor is great at details and honing in on specifics, look for ways to talk about the bigger picture with them. This puts you both on the same team and gives you goals to work towards.
- **Ask for feedback.** Know where you want to go and what you want to accomplish and learn what you need to work on to get there. Ask for opportunities giving you a chance to improve on the things you need to work on. Ask your supervisor for feedback, and if they don't give you any, ask again. Reach out to campus partners and other stakeholders and ask them for feedback — then share that with your supervisor. Don't wait for a performance evaluation once a year to know what your supervisor thinks of you. In the same vein, if you find ways to teach your supervisor the ways you're an asset, you will elevate the likelihood of getting the opportunities you want.
- **Humanize your boss.** On the days when you think they're a horrible person or out to get you, take a step back. As Patterson et al. (2012) challenge, take a minute to ask yourself if they're a horrible person or just different than you? Are their priorities different? Are their obligations different? What else could be going on? It's easy to vilify your boss and go to DEFCON 5. It's more difficult to assume positive intent and give your supervisor some grace. But, the return on investment for this is high. You may see your frustrations

lessen. Your trust may increase, and you may gain more control over the things you CAN actually control.

- **Find ways to connect outside of work.** This may seem repetitive to humanizing your boss, but whether it's quoting West Wing, talking about travel, or connecting over favorite places to eat, find something to talk about outside of work. You don't have to be best friends or even friends with your supervisor but connecting over commonalities will improve your ability to work together. A mutual respect and greater understanding can grow out of something as simple as college football or musicals, if you let it.

Do this work in your interview. Dive into what a supervisor/supervisee relationship will look like when you are job searching and decide if that will work with you. Read books on difficult conversations and managing up (*Crucial Conversations* is a good place to start). Bring this article up in a one-on-one and ask your supervisor for their opinion. Know what you need. Ask for it. Find the places you're willing to be flexible and acknowledge those but own your "non-negotiables."

Until everyone can work for themselves, supervisors will be a nature of this work. One of your "other duties as assigned" is likely to manage your boss whether you like it or not. Everyone has something to learn from their supervisors and other colleagues, and the tactics mentioned can be applied to both. Whether you're thinking about the **Foundational Knowledge** from the AFA Core Competencies (Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors, 2018) mentioned above, or looking at all of the ways managing up can help you build up your **Professional Skills** of **Navigating Complexity, Operating Strategically, Driving Results, Working Across Differences, Collaborating with Stakeholders,** and **Driving Vision and Purpose,** managing up can truly transform your competency for this work in each of these areas. Investing in your supervisor means investing in yourself.

Jessie Ashton is an Assistant Director of Greek Life at East Carolina University and a doctoral student at NC State University. She often feels she is difficult to supervise due to her high expectations, but she has been lucky to work with a leadership team in her department and division who are willing to have difficult "management" conversations. She believes the way we supervise and ask to be supervised is a powerful tool in how we work and advise students.

References

Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors. (2018). AFA Core Competencies Manual. Retrieved April 6, 2019 from <https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.afa1976.org/resource/resmgr/publications/afa-corecompetencies-2018-fi.pdf>

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