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Arguing with the Boss: A Winning Career Strategy

By JOANN S. LUBLIN



Here's a popular myth: Managers who butt heads with the boss fail to get ahead. But often, the opposite is true.

Knowing how to disagree agreeably with higher-ups increases your chances for advancement, career coaches, management consultants and recruiters say.

"It takes courage and emotional intelligence to stand up to your boss," observes Kenton R. Hill, an executive coach in Portland, Ore., who wrote "Smart Isn't Enough," a 2010 book. "You're more likely to land a bigger role if you help your boss be successful," he adds.

Executive recruiters "question your integrity" if you're a candidate who claims that you've never clashed with your supervisor, writes Russell S. Reynolds, Jr., founder of an eponymous big search firm, in his new memoir, "Heads." Tales of seamless harmony suggest "you lack the power of your own convictions," he says in an interview.

John Stroup, CEO of [Belden Inc.](#), a maker of electrical cables, says he's more apt to promote managers who are savvy about challenging him.



Belden Inc.

John Stroup, president and CEO of Belden Inc., says he's inclined to promote managers who are savvy

However, he cautions that it's not a good move right off the bat. At his previous employer, [Danaher Corp.](#), he saw some newly recruited senior managers wash out because they urged him to adopt approaches used by their old company without first establishing their credibility, he recalls.

Mr. Stroup prevailed in a disagreement with his Danaher supervisor about a risky strategic shift because they had developed a strong rapport. That man, an executive vice president, "recognized my strengths," Mr. Stroup recollects. "I felt comfortable enough to push my point of view."

The skeptical boss let him offer certain customers complete solutions for their specific needs—a departure from standard operating procedure. The idea was a success, and Mr. Stroup, a division president, was appointed a group executive not long after.

Even recently hired executives can benefit from locking horns with the boss, provided they choose battles wisely, keep their cool and build a compelling case that boosts their superior's reputation, leadership experts say.

"Disagreement is great as long as it's fact-based," says one senior executive, who was hired to run a key unit for a big

about airing their dissent.

Agreeable Disagreements

More ways to turn dissent into a career-enhancing move:

- Practice what you intend to say, and be concise.
- Use "I" statements to describe the problem. For example, "I feel like this project is not going as well as it could," instead of "You aren't doing this right."
- No name-calling or disparagement.
- Give your supervisor time to explain his or her rationale.
- If your third try fails, don't circumvent the boss to plead your case with others.

Source: WSJ reporting

post at a major packaged-goods concern.

[Tyco International](#) Ltd. assesses managers' leadership behaviors twice annually, including whether they feel comfortable "saying the emperor has no clothes" during meetings, says Laurie Siegel, its senior vice president of human resources. "The only real career-ending move here is to not bring bad news forward."

That said, smart Tyco managers also know when and where to air those disagreements.

Ms. Siegel says she and CEO Edward Breen often disagree on an employee's advancement potential. But she voices her objections to him one-on-one before alerting the full board. "He's comfortable that I will challenge him" in front of fellow directors, so long as there are no surprises, she says. Mr. Breen couldn't be reached for comment.

Bosses and boards both prefer leaders with the gumption to articulate strong views, provided that dissenters are "genuinely trying to advance the enterprise" rather than themselves during clashes with their supervisor, notes Douglas R. Conant, a retired chief executive of [Campbell Soup Co.](#) and a director of [Avon Products Inc.](#)

Several years ago, an executive vice president of a cell-phone refurbishment firm rejected a department manager's request for an executive post because he doubted her claim that the promotion would benefit the business. "She equated the proposed title with being able to tell people what to do," recalls Susan Heathfield, a human-resources consultant in Williamston, Mich., who coached the EVP.

The middle manager's authoritarian style "was seriously at odds with a company that was striving to empower people," and made her employees feel she only cared about herself, Ms. Heathfield adds. The woman repeated her request for weeks. Unpromoted, she quit months later.

At other times, patient persistence is key for winning an argument with the boss – as Barrett Stephens discovered. He's second-in-command at RSR Partners, the mid-sized search firm that Mr. Reynolds started in 1993 after leaving Russell Reynolds Associates Inc.

A year ago, a three-man marketing committee created by Mr. Stephens suggested picking a consultant to craft its first strategic marketing plan. Mr. Reynolds nixed the proposal for being too costly.

Mr. Stephens says he spent months cajoling his boss to reconsider marketing ideas from colleagues "who know more about the subject than he did." The constructive feedback impressed Mr. Reynolds. In July, he approved a revised marketing plan even though "this is not something I would have chosen to do," he admits.

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retailer in 2009. (He asked to remain anonymous so as not to embarrass his onetime employer.)

The executive, who reported to the CEO, did not agree with his boss, who long believed that small-business owners patronizing his business unit were shopping to supply their firms. Rather than airing his disagreement, he first spent 90 days analyzing purchase data and found that those customers mainly bought goods for their families.

When he presented the data to the CEO, the executive cast his research as fresh insights—and not the boss's bad call.

"How come we didn't figure this out before?" the surprised chief asked, and later endorsed the lieutenant's plan for revamping the company's marketing appeals to small-business owners. In early 2012, the executive landed a more powerful

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