



THE POWER BEHIND THE THRONE

**GETTING ALONG WITH YOUR BOSS AND
OTHERS IN A VIRTUAL WORKPLACE**

Teresa Douglas

In business, if relationships aren't king, they are at the very least the power behind the throne.

On remote or distributed teams, the quality of your relationships will often determine how hard you have to work to get the resources you need to do your job.

Nowhere is this more true than the relationship you have with your boss. All bosses have the potential to be an advocate and also a gatekeeper. In the virtual workforce, your manager's influence over your brand is much more pronounced. Work hard to get this relationship right; you will be more engaged and effective in your role if the person you report to is your ally. For some companies and many supervisors, managing a virtual team is new territory. It's one thing to manage a single freelancer while working in a traditional office. It's quite another to manage an entire team of virtual workers while also working from home.

If your company is new to the remote workforce, your boss may be grappling with how to manage you effectively when she can't see you. Be persistent—and polite—when asking for what you need. Above all, go into this relationship assuming that the person you report to wants to help you succeed. If your boss doesn't answer your questions in

one medium, try another. Do not mistake a lack of responsiveness for a lack of interest. They could be working at the task at hand and just not providing any updates. If you still don't get a response, try reaching out to a more veteran colleague to get the answers you need. If you do get an answer to your question from someone else, be sure to let your manager know. Your colleague in the same role may also lack resources, or he may not. A cross-functional colleague you work with every day may also have that information. You won't know until you ask. Word your requests as neutrally as possible and keep a virtual "paper" trail.

Conversely, many new virtual managers try to micromanage their way through the remote world. If your manager is micromanaging you, understand that this isn't necessarily about your manager's lack of trust in you; it may be a response to uncertainty. Luckily, there are things you can do to help your manager navigate this unfamiliar territory.

If you are unsure about any aspect of your job, ask! Err on the side of too much communication at the beginning, then gradually dial it down until you get to a communication level that works for both of you. This might mean living with micromanagement for a little while, then calling a meeting to discuss communication expectations now that you have both had a chance to get to know one another better.

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We all have a preferred way to interact with our colleagues. Your manager is no different when it comes to interacting with her direct reports. Among other things, you want to figure out where she stands on the formal-informal spectrum. Does your boss like joking with her direct reports, or does she prefer to keep all communication centered firmly on the task at hand? Does she prefer meetings or written reports? While there may be some room for flexibility on these issues, you will get along better if you understand that you will need to adapt to her style more than she will adapt to yours.

Every role has performance metrics. Some companies may post scorecards for each role on the company intranet. Even if your company doesn't do this, you can often figure out what is most important to the person you report to by paying attention to what she asks for and when she asks for it. Ask questions. Make it clear that you want to ensure you give her exactly what she needs.

Ask for feedback. In a perfect world, you would receive thoughtful, balanced feedback about your performance on a regular basis. In the real world, day-to-day concerns can crowd out these larger conversations unless you ask for them. This is especially true in the virtual setting, where everyone works more and you are literally out of sight for most of the day. If, for whatever reason, you don't receive feedback on your performance, try to elicit it by asking specific questions. "How am I doing?" is not a specific question. "On a scale of one to ten, how well would you say I get along with others?" is better. If you change the way you do something in response to your boss's feedback, let her know. This sends the message that you value her opinion and want to do a good job.

In almost all cases, you will settle into a mutually productive working relationship. If this doesn't prove to be the case, then try to identify the problem. Diagnosing issues can be

challenging in the remote workforce, where it is all too easy to feel isolated if things are not going well. Still, there are steps you can take to get the help you need.

Sometimes the problem between you and your manager centers around differences in working style. It is all too easy for this type of conflict to look like a performance problem. For example, if you are the type of person who needs to think about something ahead of time and your boss needs to talk things out in the moment, your boss may draw the wrong conclusions about your strategic-thinking ability. How you handle this type of friction depends on the personalities involved.

In some cases, you can call a meeting and try to address the issue directly. You might do this by saying something along the lines of “I’ve noticed that we’ve had some conflict, and I would love to find a way for us to both get what we need.” In other cases, this is not possible. Your network can be a resource here as well. First, a trusted member of your network can act as a sanity check. Ideally, this person is well connected and has a good sense of the company culture and the wider goals of your unit. Are you being reasonable? It can be hard to hear that you are the problem, but if this is the case, then denial does not help you. If your boss is the problem, then your colleague may have ideas that can help you to either endure or change your situation.

There are also things you can do on your own. Make sure that you are doing an excellent job in your role. Do not let your performance metrics dip. This might also be a good time to excel on other projects for other departments. If you are seen as an asset by other members of your leadership team, it can mitigate your boss’s perspective of you. You might even be able to use the managers of these other projects as references if you decide to look for a different internal role.

Many virtual employees have found that being managed remotely provides a great mix of immediate interaction and uninterrupted work time. In the vast majority of cases, applying a little patience and doing a little detective work will help you develop a great working relationship with your boss.

While this relationship might be the most important one to cultivate, it isn't the only one. The relationships you build with coworkers can make or break your performance in the remote workforce.

WORKING EFFECTIVELY WITH OTHERS

From the moment you join a new team, you should begin to form an idea of how the team operates. In a physical workspace, you can casually view the interactions of your coworkers just by being in the same space and observing them. In the virtual workplace, you can do the same thing, just in different ways.

Many teams use some sort of instant messaging app and may even have a group chat. If so, you can join the group chat and, in the beginning, simply observe how your coworkers communicate with one another. From a group chat, you can determine how formal or informal a group is as well as the purpose of the chat. It might be a way for coworkers to engage in fun banter throughout the day to keep things interesting, or it may be a quick way to get questions answered. Knowing the purpose can help you determine how often to check the group chat and when to use it.

Your team may also have regularly scheduled virtual team meetings. Again, in the beginning this can be a great way to observe how team members work with one another. You

may find that the interactions in chats are the same as in group meetings, or you may find that the tone is very different. The differences may be due to who the participants are in each format, such as whether a direct supervisor or a member of senior management is present, or due to the format itself. Your team may use the group chat to joke around and the team meetings to get things accomplished, or vice versa. In the virtual workforce, it's not uncommon to have different dynamics on different platforms within the same team. You can facilitate your relationship with your team by understanding which communication medium is used for what.

Responsiveness and frequency of communication are also important. Your team may have standards as to how quickly you need to reply to emails, instant messages, and other forms of communication. When you know the standards, you can follow them. The same goes for following up with team members. If your team has a standard of a 1-week response time, for instance, you wouldn't want to follow up after 3 days. If your team has a 1-day response time, it would be appropriate to follow up after that time has passed.

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You can apply this advice not only to working with your team but also to working with outside teams. If you are selected to work on a project with another group, or if you communicate with another team in general, pay special attention to how their team norms differ from those of your “home” team and adjust your approach accordingly. When in doubt, ask! If you are still uncertain about what is expected of you, let the outside team know how you will interact with them unless told otherwise. That way, there is no ambiguity about what you are going to do.

Knowing your role within the team itself can also have an impact on how you work with your coworkers. If you have been brought in as a leader, you should pay close attention to how the other leaders within the team act. If you were brought in to replace someone else, it could be helpful to gather information about how this team member worked with others, paying special attention to the things that they did well and learning from the things that didn’t work as well.

Getting along with your coworkers in the virtual workforce doesn’t have to be any more difficult than getting along with people in a traditional office. In some ways, it can be easier, as you don’t have to listen to their choice of music or smell what they had for lunch. With a little patience and dedication, you will soon develop positive working relationships with the people you collaborate with to meet goals and produce results.

Your work doesn’t exist in a vacuum: at some point over the course of your workweek, you’ll need something from someone, or someone will need something from you. Sometimes the request is easy and your colleagues are willing to help you. Other times, people are busy and resources limited. Communicating the level of urgency of the thing you need—and getting what you need in return—is an art unto itself.

COMMUNICATING URGENCY AND NEED—AND FOLLOWING UP

We've all encountered that colleague (let's call him Frantic Frank) who needs everything right now. Perhaps you have even dropped everything to help Frantic Frank get something done, only to find out that the "emergency" was all in his mind. Or maybe you've run into his polar opposite, Silent Sally. Silent Sally doesn't tell you that she is overwhelmed or unable to complete a task until her deadline passes, and her lack of communication means you miss your deadline, too. The Frantic Franks and Silent Sallys of the remote workforce soon develop a reputation as untrustworthy or hard to work with.

To be successful in any career, you should do your best to avoid becoming Frantic Frank or Silent Sally and, instead, identify and manage your interactions with these types of colleagues. This requires more than knowing how to do your job. First, you must understand what you need. Most needs fall into one of four categories (information, access, skills, or authorization), and the category of need determines the level of legwork you can do ahead of time. If you need someone to authorize your budget, for example, you can often collate all the relevant data in an easy-to-digest email or spreadsheet so the authorizing person can simply glance at the information and make a decision. If you need information, you can research whether the information is already housed somewhere else before you reach out to a colleague. Once you've done your due diligence, you can feel good about asking for what you need. Your manager, or a more veteran colleague, can often help you determine which department handles the type of request you have and which person in that department can help you. Asking the right person for help is key to actually getting the help you need.

Once you know what you need and who can assist you, you can think about when to approach that person for help. In a traditional office setting, you can swing by someone's desk and, if she doesn't look busy, ask for a minute of her time. In the remote workforce, you can't see people, and you will often have dozens of colleagues in different departments across multiple time zones. In these circumstances, it's vital to develop a sense of your colleague's work rhythm. Is this person busy with payroll on a certain day? Does she reserve mornings for time-sensitive work? Is she out on the road making sales at the end of the month? You might have better results if you wait for a time that is more convenient for her.

Now that you know when to approach your colleague, you can think about how to approach her. This step is especially important if the person is in high demand. You want to make your request as attractive and as easy to answer as possible. This starts with clearly and succinctly stating your need, followed by briefly detailing the steps you have taken to try to resolve the task on your own. Make sure to include a time estimate as well. Something like "Hey Mary, can you confirm that sales are up 3 percent this year? Joe said I have to get that info from you. I'm presenting our results to our department next week," is much more effective than an email that simply says, "Do you have a second? I want to pick your brain."

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Communicating what you need and when you need it helps everyone prioritize the work that needs to get done. In the remote workforce, you can't see what people are working on. You can't tell if someone is overwhelmed, or needs more training, or was just handed a project that takes precedence over yours. Because of this, you need to set a follow-up schedule that matches the importance and urgency of the project at hand. If the task is simple and non-urgent, or your company has guidelines for how long it should take to complete certain tasks, then you might wait until the due date to check in. If the task has many moving pieces, is ambiguous, or has a hard deadline, then you may want to set up multiple check-in points.

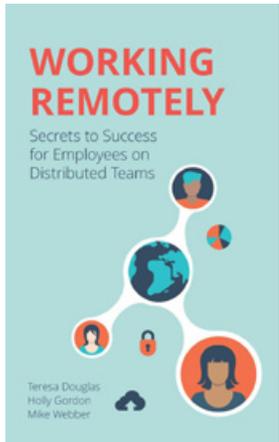
This is true whether you are managing the entire project or only one piece of it. As a project manager, the list of things you need to keep track of can seem endless, but the general categories of those things tend to fall into one of four areas: access, information, skill, or bandwidth. Some of the questions to ask yourself include the following: Are things progressing on schedule? Does anyone look or act stressed or overwhelmed? Does everyone have what they need to do the job? Does everyone understand what to do? Conversely, if you're an individual contributor on a project and the project manager hasn't set up check-in points, set up your own check-in schedule. You want to make sure you are doing the work expected of you in the time frame required, and it's far easier to salvage a situation if you catch a problem early. If the project changes scope or you are handed a new, higher-priority project, then you need to discuss and adjust timelines and expectations as soon as possible. As a project manager, you can't assume that the colleague who agreed to spend 5 hours working on your project can stay on for another 20. Similarly, as a member of a project team, you must communicate proactively if your bandwidth changes.

In a perfect world, your colleagues stay in regular communication with you as you work together on projects. Unfortunately, sometimes your colleagues become unresponsive and you have to loop in others. It's important to remain professional and give people the benefit of the doubt when doing so. Keep your tone understanding and make it clear that you are looking for the best way to proceed, instead of throwing someone under the bus. Whether the person is on your team or a different team, your supervisor is often the best person to reach out to first. Your supervisor may be able to follow up with the person directly or point you in the right direction in terms of who you should follow up with next. When possible, follow your company's appropriate chain of command and established guidelines for whom to contact and when.

Getting along with your boss and others in the remote workforce requires a thoughtful approach. Take the time to find out what your boss needs from you. Observe how your team interacts with one another—and ask plenty of questions along the way. Soon you will be known as someone who is seen as both dependable and a pleasure to work with. 📌



Info



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