



Pippa's Advice on...

Understanding your Boss and Managing Work Place Relationships.

Someone once asked me what being a PA was like. I replied 'It's as good or as bad as the boss I'm working for.' I still stand by this. Being a PA means working really closely with your boss. Ultimately your job is to assist them, so you're taking orders from them directly and are probably privy to more aspects of their life than anyone else in the company. In turn this means they essentially set the rules of your working life and dictate whether, come Sunday night, returning to work is something you dread, or look forward to.

Now, it goes without saying you can't select your boss (it's the other way around, they select you) and that you're not required to be their best friend. Of course it helps if you like one another and if that relationship should happen to spill over into the occasional social situation then that's great. But if anything, maintaining a bit of professional distance probably aids the relationship long term. Nowhere in your contract does it stipulate that you should be sharing gossip on a Monday morning, going to the pub together on a Friday and lolling over crayfish salads at lunchtime in Pret.

In an ideal world what you want is to strike a balance and have a smooth, professional, mutually respectful working relationship. In fact, you want one of those with all your colleagues if possible. So, whilst I know you have lots to think about already, what with having actual work to do and stuff, here follow some tips which might help create better relationships with your colleagues which in turn could improve and nurture your career.

1. Try to Empathise.

Think about it – when you were young and at school and one of your ordinarily easy-going, sweet natured teachers suddenly became an irritable banshee from hell who kept bursting into spontaneous tears, due to your tender age, you probably never thought at the time, 'Perhaps Miss has got raging PMT or been dumped by her boyfriend?'

But as we mature (hopefully) so do our powers of empathy. We also learn that authority figures are really the same as us. That the people in charge are just normal humans who are simply trying to keep it together, and who encounter good days and bad.

Since becoming a PA I have learnt that it's particularly useful in this job to be able to occasionally put yourself in your boss' shoes. Maybe they have been a bit short or ratty recently, but then don't they have that huge meeting with the board of directors looming? So maybe they need even more support than usual? It's easy to fall into the trap of being resentful of your boss at times, especially if they treat you a certain way, but they have a job to do, just like we do. No doubt there's also a lot about their job that you don't know about or see, so don't assume that they're out to get you. Sometimes they might act a certain way for a reason, perhaps their boss is putting a lot of pressure on them, so try to be understanding.

Equally your boss may be the master of always appearing calm, and yet you know, because you can see it in their diary, that this week their schedule is particularly demanding. So why not try to figure out the challenges your boss is facing and be prepared to offer solutions and ways to make things easier for them. They'll be so grateful. Thinking ahead like this can really show that you're an invaluable team member. Being empathetic is a wonderful quality, one which will make your boss want to keep you!

2. Separating work and home

When you're meeting new people all the time and an interaction seems insignificant, it's easy to avoid making the effort. But people remember how you treat them – and you never know who they might know. Try and remember a couple of mutual interests – even if they're outside work – as these help you to find the common ground upon which to build a rapport. If you can't quite remember where you met someone, be honest about it and use it as a conversation-starter.

3. Trust and Discretion

The above qualities are ones which are really worth earning. Too often in an office environment, issues can become overblown or distorted because someone has decided to gossip. At that point things which might be really concerning for somebody else becomes office fodder to chat about at the pub. This is obviously a breach of trust and could have repercussions. If you can prove yourself to be someone whom people can confide in, someone who is able to respect and keep a confidence, over time you will eventually be far more valued than the office gossip.

4. Welcome Diversity

So many people are change averse. People get very used to the way a company runs things and to their routine. But if a colleague is suggesting a new way of implementing things you would be wise to listen at the very least. By not dismissing people's ideas and views you are showing that you respect their opinions and that you are open minded enough to always consider things that could be for the benefit of the team. Your colleagues will be more encouraged, will feel more valued and will respect you for being someone who isn't always instantly inclined to say no just because it's easier.

5. Change something.

Truth be told, when it comes to interpersonal skills and dealing with others, we could all stand to try something new in our approach from time to time. In the coming year, see if you can identify the communication patterns that cause the most problems in your career and workplace relationships. Make a conscious effort to look at them, work on them, and try a new approach. None of us are perfect which is why I think it's nice to think about how we're doing from time to time, to take a step back and ask 'what could I do to improve?'

I really hope there has been a bit of food for thought here.

See you soon and lots of love,

Pippa xx