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Adapting to Your Boss' Style

As a legal administrator, your ability to work well with others can mean the difference in whether your career advances or stalls. To move forward professionally, it's especially important that you have a good working relationship with your immediate supervisor. But this isn't always as easy as it sounds.

Bosses run the gamut, and you and your manager may be fairly close in compatibility or you may represent two ends of a spectrum, with completely different communication preferences, temperaments and work styles. Even if you identify with the latter case, as a professional administrator, your role requires you to find a productive and harmonious way of working together.

Whether you are reporting to someone new or simply trying to work more effectively with your current manager, adapting to your supervisor's style may call for extra effort and flexibility on your part. These strategies can help you establish and maintain a mutually beneficial relationship:

Understand your boss's world. The more you know about your manager's job and operating sphere, the more support you can provide in carrying out your responsibilities. Here are some aspects of your supervisor's world that you need to know:

- How your job relates to your boss' scope of responsibility.
- The number of people reporting to your supervisor. This usually has some bearing on how independent you should be.
- Your boss's ambitions and goals, which will influence how he or she sets priorities.
- The dynamics between your supervisor and others in the office, including direct reports and anyone to whom he or she reports.
- Your manager's career path and history with the firm, which can provide a better sense of your boss's clout and experience.
- Your supervisor's knowledge strengths and weaknesses. Even someone with a strong legal background might lack an administrator's perspective. If so, you may need to offer additional business rationale and context for initiatives you propose.

Discuss communication preferences. No relationship can flourish without open communication, but it may be hard for you and your boss to find time to keep each other informed. Or perhaps you don't reach resolution on issues when you do talk. These types of problems often stem from differences in communication style.

For instance, maybe your supervisor likes to discuss office issues and make decisions on the fly – while dashing to the airport or commuting home – but you prefer non-rushed, in-

person meetings. Or, your boss may have a penchant for leaving long voice mails full of important details, when you would find it much easier to receive information via e-mail so you can maintain an electronic record. Another consideration is whether your manager wants to be kept in the loop on routine office matters or consulted only if problems arise.

If you and your boss have yet to reconcile these issues, make time to discuss them. Together, you can agree on communication goals and preferences that will help you both work more effectively.

Accommodate your manager's work style. Although you don't have to conform to your higher-up's style, you may need to make allowances for your differences. For example, you may have learned that your boss will probably wait until the day before an important staff meeting to review your draft of proposed new procedures for employees. Your past experiences may also foretell that you'll need to spend considerable time with your manager answering questions about the new policies and explaining the rationale behind them. If this mode of operating tends to be a pattern, plan for it, rather than allowing the last-minute review to cause undue stress. You might simply clear your schedule for the day before the big meeting, knowing you'll need that time to address your supervisor's feedback.

Accept personality differences. Even if you and your manager are polar opposites when it comes to personality, you can usually prevent these differences from becoming a source of conflict or frustration. Reduce the potential for personality clashes by trying not to be judgmental toward your boss. Also, avoid the tendency to internalize your supervisor's moods or reactions. If your manager seems impatient or unusually demanding, don't assume it's your fault. He or she may be bothered by something unrelated to work or simply frustrated by an inability to resolve some pressing issues.

You can also minimize conflicts by learning your manager's flash points. If you know certain attitudes, subjects, actions or events are hot buttons with your boss, steer away from these issues if possible, or at least be sensitive to how and when you address them with your supervisor. And even though you can't change your boss's personality, you can model your own behavioral preferences in your interactions with your manager and hope that he or she will follow your cues.

At various points in your career, you're likely to find yourself reporting to someone with whom you have little in common on either a personal or professional level. But even if you and your boss aren't ideally suited to working together, you can still forge a productive partnership if you take the initiative to improve your interactions. By staying attuned to your manager's style and adapting your responses as necessary, you should be able to make the most of this critically important relationship.