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# Managing upwards: a guide for the foundation year doctor

## Introduction

The concept of managing your boss sounds peculiar, as people usually only think of managing staff under them. Nevertheless, adept management 'upwards' can reap dividends. It is not manipulative or sly – it is about good working relations. This article is mainly about dealing with consultants. However, the same principles can apply to other doctors more senior than you in the team.

## Managing expectations

Find out your consultant's expectations. If he/she does not see you on a daily basis, he/she may ask for opinions from nursing and other staff. These may be biased, for a number of reasons, and not necessarily because you are incompetent or have poor interpersonal skills. Your consultant does not automatically know what you are doing and you cannot assume this. He/she may have no idea of your workload. You must apprise him/her of the situation and your achievements without sounding boastful or resentful. Be assertive, not aggressive, and correct any wrong impressions confidently.

Make your consultant trust you – be reliable and deliver what you say you will. Do not make empty promises or lead him/her to believe falsely that you will do something. Put yourself out when appropriate without being obsequious.

One consultant was alleged to have told his house officer 'I don't want to hear your excuses', having heard adverse comments about him. However, a decent boss will want to give you the benefit of the doubt, ask you for your point of view and come to a balanced decision on how to continue.

Even nowadays, consultants have different habits and idiosyncrasies. It is best to go along with them, unless there is something blatantly inimical to safety and/or

non-evidence-based. Everyone acknowledges, with indulgent exasperation, that Mr X likes certain obscure investigations or examinations on his patients.

Bosses may be two-faced – pleasant to you in person while metaphorically stabbing you in the back. Remember, your consultant is human and imperfect and may not realize the effects of his/her behaviour. Some senior doctors have prejudices about modern doctors in training; for example, that their only idea of patient management is to write 'for senior review' in the notes. Seniors may also believe that juniors are never present at the same time as they are, because of nights or time off after nights. Avoid playing up to the stereotype if you can help it. By all means, work hard, and also get yourself noticed for the right reasons. Do not sulk or act like a martyr.

'Micromanagement' is not letting you get on with the job without constantly questioning you and telling you what to do. That is how schoolchildren are treated. Some consultants are natural micromanagers and some not. While your consultant may be relatively removed from what you do and not micromanage you, another member of the team may try to. Micromanagement is not automatically a sign of lack of trust, although it may feel like that. Some people are just naturally obsessive and some find it difficult to delegate.

## In the other person's shoes

Work out how to influence your consultant. Does he/she like figures, evidence and hard facts? Does he/she respond to declarations of feelings? Does he/she give instant answers or need time to reflect? This can help you formulate your problems and solutions in a way that will obtain the best help.

Watch how other people deal with your consultant. You do not necessarily have to copy them, as you are in a different position, but it gives you an idea of how to proceed. Consultants have different communication preferences – some via their secretaries, some directly (face-to-

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face, telephone or bleep) and some through e-mail. You may be able to speak to your consultant during or after routine contacts such as ward rounds, or he/she may rush off. Strange as it may sound, some consultants are actually shy, perhaps with other staff rather than patients.

Your consultant is not a mind-reader, and you need to express what is concerning you and what you want. Non-specific hints are unhelpful. For instance, if you mention that another consultant's team attend theatre more, are you:

- Simply commenting idly on this fact
- Complaining that you get too little theatre time
- Pleased that you are spared too much?

If it is the second, then state that you would appreciate visiting theatre more and suggest how your work could be organized to facilitate this. You cannot rely on the consultant to guess your preferences, particularly if he/she does not know you very well.

You may think that your consultant does not have a superior, but there are medical managers (such as clinical directors) and non-medical managers that he/she must answer to. Consultants have many more duties than simply caring for patients and junior doctors. There are pressures from government targets, human resource issues and funding. Your consultant may have worries of his/her own, such as lack of office space, patient or staff complaints or personal difficulties. Like you, he/she will have good days and bad.

### Conclusions

We should all learn to manage upwards as well as downwards. You cannot assume that your consultant knows your daily schedule or what is on your mind. Put yourself in his/her position and try to imagine what you might feel and how you would react. Do not be afraid to state your concerns and views assertively – your consultant has much to think about and

may not realize what is going on. Remember, your consultant is human too. **BJHM**

*Conflict of interest: Dr Hooke has worked in both management and medicine. Her views are her own and do not necessarily reflect those of her employer or any other organization that she is associated with.*

### KEY POINTS

- Be clear and assertive with your consultant – do not drop vague hints that may not be picked up.
- Do not assume that your consultant knows the intricacies of your daily work.
- Your consultant may be having a bad day too.
- Know what makes your consultant tick.
- Influence your consultant to understand your point of view without crawling or manipulating.