Leading Up: How to Manage the Relationship With Your Own Manager

Leadership - 8 December 2025 - By Dr. Amitabh Kumar

An overlooked half of leadership

Most leadership development focuses on managing and inspiring a team. Far less attention goes to the relationship a leader has with their own manager, even though that relationship strongly shapes how much support, resource and trust a leader is able to secure for their team. Leading up is not political manoeuvring; it is a legitimate, learnable skill.

Understanding your manager's context

A useful starting point is genuinely understanding the pressures your manager is under: what they are accountable for, what their own manager expects of them, and what constraints shape their decisions. Leaders who only view the relationship through their own needs often struggle to get support, because their requests are not framed in a way that connects to what their manager actually needs to deliver.

Practical habits that build a strong working relationship

Bring solutions, not only problems. Raising an issue alongside at least a preliminary view on how to address it builds far more confidence than raising the problem alone and waiting to be told what to do.

Manage expectations proactively. Flagging a likely delay or risk early, with a clear plan, is almost always better received than a surprise later, even if the underlying issue is the same.

Ask directly what "good" looks like. Many leaders assume they understand their manager's priorities and are wrong. A direct, periodic conversation, "what matters most to you from me this quarter," prevents significant misalignment.

Adapt to their working style, not just your own. Some managers prefer detailed written updates; others prefer brief verbal check-ins. Matching their preferred mode of communication, rather than defaulting only to your own, removes unnecessary friction.

Give honest feedback upward, carefully. Leading up does not mean only managing perceptions. Respectfully raising a concern, about a decision, a process, or how you are being supported, is part of a healthy working relationship, and most good managers respond better to this than leaders fear.

Why this matters for your own team

A leader who manages upward well is generally better able to secure resources, protect their team from unreasonable pressure, and represent their team's work accurately to senior stakeholders. Leading up, done well, is not self-serving; it is often one of the most direct ways a leader can serve

the people who report to them.