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Leading up to your boss is as important as leading your subordinates

If you ran a Google search on leadership, you would find 167 million hits. These include books, courses, consultants and companies that teach leaders and would-be leaders how to lead their team members and companies to success. Many offer excellent advice and techniques on leadership. Very few, however, examine how a person can lead his or her boss. In examining the successes, and failures, of sixteen individuals from business, politics, war and religion, Michael Useem has elegantly shown how subordinates can change the course of history by leading their leaders (*Leading Up: How to Lead Your Boss So You Both Win* 2001).

Starting with the Civil War, Useem presents a birds' eye view of how Joseph Johnson, the commander of the Confederate Army, lost the confidence of President Davis and ultimately lost his command of the army by not keeping the President apprised of the battlefield situation. Useem counterbalances Johnson's unwillingness to appraise his boss with his replacement's insistence of keeping the President informed, even by inviting him to witness the progress of the encounters. His replacement was Robert E. Lee.

Useem describes how David Pottruck of Charles Schwab & Co. was able to persuade his boss, Charles Schwab, that internet trading was the new revolution and the company had to move in that direction to preclude financial ruin and reestablish its dominance in the industry.

He relates how Romeo Dallaire's attempts to convince UN Secretary General Boutris Boutris-Gali to send additional UN troops to Rwanda fell on deaf ears, resulting in the slaughter of 800,000 Rwandans. Had Dallaire flown to the UN headquarters in New York, he may have led up to Boutris-Gali, convinced him of the imminent danger and saved hundreds of thousands of innocent lives from being massacred.

Robert Ailing, Eckerd Pfeiffer and Thomas Wyman, the powerful CEOs of British Airways, Compaq and CBS respectively, found themselves out of their jobs by not leading up to their boards of directors.

Peter Pace of the US Marine Corps led six bosses by serving each one as if they were his only boss. Sandy Hill Pittman, by not questioning her guide leading the team up to the summit of Mt. Everest, was unable to save his life. Charlene Barshefsky was able to lead President Clinton to accept the free trade agreement with China. Domingo Cavallo, the head of Argentina's economy, was able to lead his President to align the country's inflation raged national currency with the US dollar, ending years of turmoil.

Perhaps the most profound examples of leading up were conducted by Abraham, Moses and Samuel, the biblical sages, who were able to lead up to God to convey the needs of their followers, sometimes reversing God's decisions despite rampant hedonism within the community. They were the ultimate practitioners of leading up.

As diverse as these examples are, the unifying concept is that no matter where in the chain of command a person is, he or she not only needs to lead up to the boss, particularly when the bosses' judgment is wrong or the facts are inadequately delivered, but also to lead down to subordinates. Concurrently, bosses need to be cognizant of voices within the organization who warn of imminent danger that could be detrimental to the company and possibly innocent lives. Michael Useem has presented a superbly researched and elegantly written work that deserves your attention, especially if you are a leader, intend to be a leader or are under the influence of a leader.