



Who's the Boss? The Organizational Impact of Bypassing the Chain of Command

Urgent message: A chain of command exists in most organizations to assure efficient and accurate communication, orderly and organized business operations, and proper allocation of time and resources. When the chain of command is broken, however, the entire business can suffer.

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In American business culture, organizations are typically built in a hierarchal structure and follow an established chain of command. To ensure smooth and efficient operations, employees are generally expected to communicate work issues to the supervisor directly above them in the hierarchy for direction and resolution. Conversely, high-level managers, owners, and executives are expected to allow their direct reports to execute and communicate company directives to their workers as their job roles entail.

Ideally, everyone from the top down will adhere to the prescribed chain of command. However, there are instances when individuals will bypass the chain of command and initiate business communications with people two or more rungs above or below them on the hierarchal ladder. In an urgent care setting, some examples of this type of bypassing might include:

- An area operations director who oversees multiple centers bypassing a particular center's manager to directly engage the front office staff or the medical assistants.
- A frontline staffer sending an email to the corporate office (in a corporate-owned center) about an issue that was never brought to the center manager's/supervisor's attention.
- An owner-operator who has hired management only to bypass them frequently to give direction and convey directives to the medical assistants and



- billing/registration teams.
- An employed doctor in the center ignoring the entire corporate management hierarchy to direct staff per his will. Medical support personnel, conditioned to follow the doctor in matters related to patient care, yield to the doctor's interference in the business operation.

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Listening vs Delegating

Contemporary organizations tend to emphasize a “flattening” of the organization chart, with an emphasis on self-managing teams and leadership tuned into the “pulse” of colleagues at all levels. Such includes “open-door policies” among senior leaders to encourage transparency with the organization’s employees.

While there is nothing wrong with higher-ups “listening” to frontline staff, delegating directly to them can create problems. When senior leaders or directors skips over a middle manager or supervisor to delegate to employees directly, they act upon several assumptions which typically are incorrect:

- That the supervisor is not keeping the frontline employee busy. However, adding to the front line’s workload without consulting the supervisor may result in the frontline employee becoming overwhelmed or overworked.
- That the work isn’t already in progress and that the frontline employee’s other duties and projects are less important than what the senior leader is requesting. Believing the senior leader’s work to take precedent, the employee may neglect more time-sensitive work.
- That the middle management layer is superfluous, ineffective, or impotent. The not-so-subliminal message is sent that the middle manager adds no value to the interaction.

Likewise, when frontline staff learn that they can access upper management directly, it is critical that upper management refer employees back to their immediate supervisor to resolve questions regarding the delegation of work, delegation of job duties, or work performance.

Although there are rare instances when this practice can’t be avoided, frequently ignoring a company’s chain of command, regardless of which direction the bypassing is occurring, inevitably leads to a whole host of problems, and can throw an organization into chaos. In the following examples, we’ll look at both instances of workplace bypassing, briefly examine the ramifications of each, and offer several strategies to help nip the practice in the bud, restoring the proper following of the chain of command.

‘Typical’ Usurping of the Chain of Command

In this instance, an employee with a workplace concern or issue bypasses his or her direct supervisor, and addresses the issue with the boss’s boss, or someone even higher up the chain. One example would be an employee bypassing the immediate supervisor to com-

municate directly with a higher-up who may be a former boss with whom he or she had a good working relationship and has since been promoted. By habit or willfully, the employee might continue to seek their counsel without keeping their new supervisor in the loop. Or perhaps the employee feels the supervisor is inexperienced or incompetent in their job, and can’t provide enough direction. Either way, except in circumstances where the immediate supervisor cannot be contacted regarding an urgent issue or has violated company policy, this is always bad business etiquette. Such behavior inevitably creates issues for the immediate supervisor, and in the case of an urgent care operation, it can result in:

- The supervisor not being made aware of clinic issues, thereby having no opportunity to address or remedy them.
- The appearance to the supervisor’s boss/higher-ups that there is ineffective and/or poor communication with employees.
- The supervisor being unable to make effective and informed decisions regarding clinic issues and workplans, thanks to the staff rerouting important information outside of the department.

Naturally, usurping the immediate supervisor will create tension and friction, which can often spill over into the rest of the department or business unit. Not only is overall morale lowered when the supervisor feels marginalized and disrespected by the clinic employees, but it places the offending employee’s job security in jeopardy.

Dipping Down

When an owner, executive, or senior-level manager “dips down” to engage their direct report’s employees, this is also a bypassing of the chain of command, but from the opposite direction. A few reasons why a boss or owner might “dip down:”

- The boss may have little or no confidence in the supervisor’s ability to effectively perform the job, with the resulting frustration leading them to engage the supervisor’s subordinates directly.
- The boss may overreact to minor issues, believing that they must fix every little problem that arises.
- The boss has a social management style, and likes to mingle and help employees.
- The boss has an inflated ego, which causes him or her to overstep their boundaries and unnecessarily flex their power and authority.
- The boss may be unaware or oblivious that he or she is creating a problem for their direct report.

In most cases of dipping down, the owner/boss will not inform the supervisor that they are indeed communicating with his or her subordinates. Thus, unless the employees say something, the supervisor is unaware that the boss is directing the staff.

Ramifications of Bypassing

The consequences of frequent bypassing in either direction can range from bruised egos to organizational chaos. And despite what the initiator may believe, bypassing has a negative impact on every party involved—including the bypasser.

Frontline or lower-level employees

When a frontline employee bypasses his immediate supervisor, it demonstrates a lack of respect and professional courtesy. Tensions between supervisor and employee may increase, trust and communication may break down, and disciplinary action can result. This leads to turnover, inefficient clinic operations, and overall lowered morale.

Conversely, when a higher-up bypasses their direct report and begins giving unsolicited directives to the frontline staff, uncertainty and confusion results. The frontline staff is left to wonder, "Whose orders am I to follow? My supervisor or her boss? Why am I stuck in the middle of their power struggle?" Being placed in such an awkward position where loyalties are forcibly divided between two workplace authority figures is stressful and anxiety-inducing, and a detriment to high-level performance.

Owner-operators, high-level managers, and executives

Interestingly, owner-operators and execs who dip down cause problems for not only their direct reports and the frontline staff, but themselves in the short and long term. By appropriating the time and manpower resources of their direct reports, the business as a whole will likely experience a number of lowered performance metrics. And if the higher-up's education and experience is in an area such as strategic planning, they may lack the knowledge and qualifications to effectively manage clinical employees on the front line (meaning they don't neces-

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sarily understand that aspect of the business, and would be a poor proxy for the supervisor anyway). Additionally, interfering with the direct report's job duties distracts from their own responsibilities, also causing their individual performance to suffer.

Supervisors and managers

Whether it's employees skipping up rungs on the hierarchal ladder, or the bigwigs dipping down to engage frontline staff, it's the middle manager or supervisor who gets caught in the middle. If the operations manager is dipping down, for example, the supervisor is left wondering if his or her staff is

focused on their duties, or are they involved in the owner's side project? So not only does the supervisor now need to micromanage her employees, but the owner has undermined her authority in front of everyone. This behavior by the owner usually leads to frustration, lowered confidence, increased stress, and resentment in the supervisor.

Strategies to curtail bypassing

As the above examples illustrate, bypassing the chain of command, except in the aforementioned exceptions, hurts the entire business. The chain of command is in place for a reason; it promotes overall efficiency, timely and accurate communication, orderly and organized business operations, and the proper allocation of time, resources, manpower, and responsibilities into the most capable hands. Implementing the following workplace management strategies can be very effective in ensuring all organizational members are following the proper chain of command:

Frontline staff

- Give your immediate supervisor the opportunity to address your workplace issues or concerns before taking them to upper management. Your supervisor will appreciate the professional courtesy, which goes a long way toward building an effective and cohesive team.
- Avoid the temptation to take workplace issues to professional colleagues and associates who occupy posi-

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tions in the hierarchy above your supervisor. Instead, stick to the chain of command except in extreme cases.

Supervisors/middle managers

- Be professional and candid when discussing the owner/higher-up dipping down. Rather than making an emotional appeal, present facts, anecdotal evidence, and performance metrics that support your need to have complete control and autonomy over your staff. Employ concrete evidence that their bypassing is having a negative effect on operations. Ask questions to uncover why they feel the need to bypass you, and offer solutions on how all parties can meet their objectives by following the chain of command.
- During the onboarding process and periodically thereafter, frontline staff should be apprised of the correct protocols and the proper channels wherein their workplace issues, concerns, and directives can be addressed.

Owners/executives/upper management

- Owners, executives, and higher-level managers should avoid communicating with employees regarding workplace issues that the employee has not discussed with their immediate supervisor. Rather, they should steer the employee back to the immediate supervisor, and advise them on the proper communication protocols.
- Understand that the urgent care professionals you hired probably understand their job functions in ways that you don’t. Hence, resist the urge to jump

Summary

- A proper chain of command can help an organization assure efficient and accurate communication, proper allocations of resources, and orderly day-to-day operations.
- Staff, starting with frontline workers, are generally expected to communicate issues to the supervisor directly above them; conversely, upper management—including ownership—is expected to allow supervisors below them to execute and communicate company directives to their direct reports.
- A worker taking concerns to upper management instead of their own supervisor—going over their boss’s head, in other words—can leave the supervisor feeling disrespected, often resulting in friction that affects unit morale.
- Upper management “dipping down” can also result in the supervisor feeling marginalized or, worse, give staff the impression that the supervisor does not have the full confidence of upper management.
- Frontline staff and upper management alike are advised to follow the chain of command unless an operational emergency requires oversight of higher-ups or direct, immediate communication between the two.

in and dip down when you have an idea, plan, concern, or frustration, and present the information to individuals tasked with handling and executing your higher-level directives. Work together to find the best way to implement the initiative while respecting and honoring their position with their teams.

Conclusion

Organizations, both large and small, are structured to assure frontline staff, managers, and leaders have the information needed to do their jobs, have authority to make business decisions and/or allocate resources and direct staff, and are held accountable for their areas of responsibility. When senior leaders dip down by engaging frontline staff directly, or when frontline staff bypasses their immediate supervisors to go “straight to the top,” such undermines the organizational structure and introduces chaos and confusion to the organization. ■