



DEPARTMENT OF THE AIR FORCE
HEADQUARTERS UNITED STATES AIR FORCE
WASHINGTON, D.C.

REPLY TO
ATTN OF: Your Supervisor


SUBJECT: The Boss

TO: A New Lieutenant

I am sure that you have heard the slogan, "The boss isn't always right, but the boss is always the boss." No matter how we feel about this statement, it is basically true. However, I would like to suggest to you that your supervisor is not always right, but your supervisor is always responsible. I once heard a General Officer say, "There are no 'dumb' bosses who make 'dumb' decisions. They are rational men and women who make reasoned decisions based upon the information available to them." I contend that you have a unique challenge, for it is up to you to make sure that you give your boss enough of the right information to stop him or her from making 'dumb' decisions.

Because your supervisor is responsible, he has the right to expect things to be done his way. When he says we shall march up the hill, you have a basic responsibility to march up the hill and lead those whom you supervise with the degree of enthusiasm that would indicate to them that marching up the hill is just as much your idea as it is your supervisor's. Now if you disagree with his idea, you have the right and, more importantly, the responsibility to tell him, in a diplomatic manner, and in private if necessary the reasons for your disagreement. If, after hearing your point of view, the boss says, "We shall march up the hill, and that is my final position," then, if you can within the bounds of your integrity, march up the hill, press on with enthusiasm. I am dwelling so hard on this point for two reasons, (1) because the boss is responsible and (2) in accepting your commission, you promised to "observe and follow such orders and directions...as may be given by the President of the United States or other superior officers acting in accordance with the laws of the United States of America."

In relating to your supervisor you should study his habits, writing style, briefing style, military bearing, and other characteristics. You should base your actions with him and on his behalf with an understanding of what he wants. This does not mean that you should become a "yes man." However, if he asks you to write a letter for his signature, doesn't it make sense for you to review earlier documents that he has signed and prepare the letter in his style rather than your own? Doesn't it make sense to disagree with the boss in private if his temperament makes public disagreement uncomfortable or even impossible? Doesn't it make sense to put yourself in his shoes and respond to his leadership in the same positive manner that you would expect of your subordinates?


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AN OLD LIEUTENANT