

The Five O'Clock News®

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"One organization with a long record of success in helping people find jobs is The Five O'Clock Club."

FORTUNE

Celebrating 25 years—
America's Premier
Career Coaching and
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Professionals, Managers
and Executives

Your Boss and Your Career

Make Sure You're Pulling Together

by Dwight Clarke, Five O'Clock Club Career Coach, with David Madison



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What kind of grade will you give to your career on the day you get the gold watch?

Of course, nobody actually gets a gold watch anymore—it's become a metaphor and a cliché for that end-of-career moment when you turn 65. Of course, that cut-off age doesn't necessarily apply anymore as well. But regardless of how long you remain in your career, it's always fair to ask if it is evolving and turning out the way you want-

ed it to. Will it get an A+ or D- ...or worse?

At the Five O'Clock Club we urge people to think about their career direction and quality as early as possible. Signing up for Club sessions is like enrolling in a course in career management—the Club is for career-minded people. And, at the weekly small group that I coach, we always counsel people with multiple job offers to choose the one that keeps them on the right career path—in other words, know your Fifteen- or Forty-Year Vision® and let it pull you forward. Many people have sorely regretted being dazzled by money when faced with multiple job offers. Money has a way of clouding judgment, resulting in poor decisions that can translate into career derailment.

But let's assume that you keep your wits about you, and make the perfect choice: You take a job that positions you brilliantly for the future. It's got all (or most) of the right ingredients, and the prospects for the next few years are bright.

However, career-minded people know that very little can be left to chance. The hard work required by your new job awaits you, of course. But making sure that the new job unfolds as you want it to from a career perspective will be largely up to you—and also requires hard work. Guiding *your* career is not a priority for your colleagues, subordinates and bosses. You must be proactive to assure that the job you accepted lives up to its promise and moves you toward your Fifteen- or Forty-Year Vision.

**Even a perfect job
requires *your* career guidance.**

Now, while colleagues and subordinates can't be expected to help with your career, the boss, in fact, is another story. We all know that there are good bosses and bad bosses—with varying levels of management and people skills. There are enlightened bosses who are concerned with talent management and succession planning, and who want to make full use of their employees. They are more likely to be sensitive to the career aspirations of the people they've hired. But you must be prepared to push forward with your career no matter where your boss falls on the scale of

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enlightenment and sensitivity. It's important, in a very real sense, to manage your boss so that he or she becomes your career ally.

Establishing the Plan from Day One

When you start your new job, you will probably have a pretty good idea of what you were hired to do, because you probed during the interview. A couple of great interview questions are, "What's keeping you up at night that I can help solve?" and "Three or six months from now, what do you hope I will have accomplished?" You ask these questions, if, as the Club recommends, you think like a consultant during the interview. And you concluded, when you accepted the offer, that this new job will move your career forward.

At the outset, therefore, the challenges, goals and tasks should be defined as clearly as possible. This is a way of assuring that you and the boss really are in agreement. How many times have we heard, "The job turned out to be something else—it's not what they said it would be during the interview"? Or, "I was hired for this role, but three months later the department was reorganized and I was reassigned." It's very true that you can get blindsided—but it's also very true that you need to be proactive in managing the agenda that will keep your career on track.

Some bosses assume that everyone understands what needs to be done.

So, obviously, you and the boss need to talk, and the conversation must be structured. For good bosses, this comes naturally. But there will be other bosses who are unaccustomed to careful planning and goal setting, and who just want to "turn you loose." They might assume that everyone understands what needs to be done, based on several hours of conversation during the interviewing process. In fact, however, everyone needs to come to a consensus about

tasks and desired outcomes—in other words, both the boss and the employee need to be managing expectations. This is known as the performance management process. This is a process for reaching goals and—may I be so bold to say?—for managing your boss, especially if he or she doesn't possess superior management skills. This discipline can help to stack the odds in favor of making the job evolve to your advantage, in terms of satisfaction and career progression.

Your plan should be your constant reference point.

The performance management process can be traced to the visionary philosophies of Peter Drucker, who advanced the concept of Management by Objectives (MBO). The mechanics include a one-on-one conference with your boss to survey the challenges and goals that lie ahead, usually for the next year. Drucker's MBO introduced the acronym SMART, which can guide the setting of your objectives for the year. A lot may have been said during the job interview about what keeps the boss up at night or what needs to be done during your first few months on the job; now it's time to construct the blueprint and follow the SMART format.

SMART

S is for specific. Your objectives should be very well defined, with you and the boss agreeing on the desired outcomes. This implies, of course, that the objectives will be known. Reflecting on several decades of experience, Drucker observed: "MBO is just another tool. It is not the great cure for management inefficiency. MBO works if you know the objectives, and 90 percent of the time you don't."

M is for measurable: Will you be able to count or quantify what you've done in a meaningful way? That is, do you and the boss know how outcomes will be evaluated from a metrics point of view? This may mean bringing in

100 new accounts, writing 15 procedures, opening 25 stores or plants, or producing 1,000 widgets. How will success be measured?

A is for achievable. This speaks to the environment that you work in. Do you have the staff, tools and resources necessary to meet the objectives agreed upon? Analyzing the "A" also represents another opportunity to review the fundamental question, "Is this what I signed on for?"

R is for realistic. Are the objectives, in fact, attainable? You won't be advancing your case or your career if you agree to goals that are beyond your reach. Is the atmosphere collegial rather than one-way? If you are treated as a respected member of the team, then there should be negotiation and give-and-take, with objectives and conclusions based on your input and suggestions—and your understanding of the job.

T is for timing. You're planning for the year or perhaps for six months, but there may be multiple deadlines involved. Everyone should understand when the deliverables will be delivered.

Drucker said that management by objectives works if you *know the objectives*, and 90 percent of the time, you don't!

Your Role in Managing the Boss

The one-on-one conference with the boss and the fleshing out of the SMART formula to fit your situation can be critical for success in your job—and for getting the boss to understand how serious you are about doing well and managing your career. Hence, the proactive employee will not be content if these exercises are neglected. It's no good to say, "Well this doesn't seem to be the boss's priority, so I'll just do the daily grind and forge ahead with the general goals that seem to be 'in the air' around the office." Getting an hour on your boss's schedule should be doable for most people, and the planning done

then can help to bring the boss on board with the agenda as you see it. No one can deny that the boss is one of the most important and influential persons in your life; he or she will assume that you're pulling together to meet the company's objectives. You want to do everything you can to assure that you're pulling together for what you want to get out of your years with the organization. Maybe Peter Drucker was exaggerating when he said that 90 percent of time managers don't have a grasp of objectives, but that would lead us to suspect that most bosses won't give priority to the kind of MBO meeting that the proactive employee regards as essential. Maybe it isn't part of his or her management style; but it's in your best interest—so push to get the meeting!

Write a report of what happened at the planning meeting with your boss.

Keeping Your Finger on the Pulse: Get It in Writing

Unless there's a stenographer present, guess who's going to take the minutes of the meeting! Just as you made lots of notes during your job interviews—to guarantee proper follow-up to land the offer—now that you're huddling with the boss as an employee you need to keep a careful record of what was said and what was agreed upon.

Maybe you'll have your laptop with you during the meeting, or take notes the old-fashioned way, but as soon as your meeting is over, write a thorough report. Perhaps you can create a spreadsheet listing the major projects, subordinate tasks, objectives, to-do lists, and deadlines. There may no need to reinvent the wheel: some companies have MBO templates to use, but the ideal is to have everything listed on easy-to-read tables with columns for comments and conclusions. When the document is ready, it should be reviewed with the boss and tweaked if necessary. The modern cliché, "Are we on the same

page?," certainly applies here. You're in a better position if the boss sees your projection for the next year in writing and signs off on the document.

Keeping Your Finger on the Pulse: Nobody Wants Surprises

Your written plan doesn't go in the drawer—at least in the sense of being out of sight and out of mind. I refer to it as your blueprint—which means it should be consulted frequently. Your boss may have said to you, "We'll look at this every quarter or in six months," but you know better. It should be your constant reference point, so that you can track your own progress regularly against the challenges and goals that have been set for you.

A lot can happen in a matter of weeks, so it may be appropriate to meet with the boss more often than quarterly, to consider...

- Have there been dramatic changes in your industry?
- Have economic trends had an impact on your company's profitability?
- Have department goals been revised significantly, in such a way that some of your major tasks or projects are now off strategy? Have other priorities emerged?
- Have others around you been fired or reassigned? Have new people come on board?
- Have other departments or employees failed on deliverables that impact your ability to do your job?
- Has an assignment turned out to be unrealistic, meaning that your efforts should be channeled in other directions?
- Is there something else that the boss now considers urgent?

Maybe you won't have to deal with major changes or turbulence, and maybe your action plan for the year can remain intact. But even in periods of calm and stability, it's advisable to ask the boss for frequent reviews of the plan.

Your Objectives: Do You Have the Skills to Get There?

At the Five O'Clock Club, we often point out that career-minded people review their résumés frequently. You may

be tempted to file away the résumé when a job search has come to a successful conclusion: "I guess I won't have to look at that again for a while." But looking at the résumé from time to time is a way of monitoring your own progress. If you're six months into your new job and you can't think of any significant new skills and accomplishments to add to your résumé, you may be stagnating.

You want to head off the stagnation. When you're consulting with your boss on your job plan for the next year, it's important to "grow the job"—which is a term we usually associate with landing a job that suits you best. In thinking of the months ahead, you want to look for ways to enhance your skills, expand your knowledge, and increase your value to the company. If you are looking to stretch and get to the next level, there are bound to be skill gaps—in fact, you *want* the skill gaps. You want to be able to say to your boss as the plan takes shape, "We have documented my goals and objectives, and here's the training I need to attain them." This may include courses, seminars, and certifications; it may include rotations in other departments or divisions; it may include on-the-job training with an in-house guru. Development planning—your development as a career professional—goes hand-in-hand with objective setting, and the ideal is to have your boss as advocate, partner, and sponsor.

The Outcome: End-of-Year Appraisals

It has been common for employees to be reactive when the time comes for formal appraisals. But this is no time to wait and see what the boss thinks of you—or at least what will be written formally in the appraisal.

You can help with the appraisal process by keeping those above you continually informed. This can even be done in very casual ways. At the Five O'Clock Club, we often speak of the Eight-Word Message to let superiors know what's happening and advance your cause. For example, if you meet the boss's boss on the elevator and she

asks, “How’s it going?,” it’s not strategic to talk about the weather or baseball. Rather, “How’s it going?,” can be answered with, “Well, our team just wrapped up the Simpson project.” This is just a minor way of communicating your role and contribution. But, of course, there’s also the structured process that I’ve been talking about.

It’s up to you to document your performance and accomplishments. In the original planning meeting you agreed on how success would be measured; there was consensus on the appropriate metrics. All along you should be tracking everything. On the Excel spreadsheet that you created listing your tasks and objectives, every week add as much detailed information as possible charting your progress. What have you achieved in each category? And keep the boss informed. It’s not really in your best interest to leave the boss wondering or guessing. Even bosses with a hands-off management style—who pride themselves on not micromanaging—will usually appreciate the precision and documentation that you provide.

Clearly this informative approach can have an impact on your formal appraisal, since you actually help to write it! The on-going discussion and dialogue also provide the boss with ample opportunity to voice concerns, criticisms and complaints about your performance. You can initiate course corrections and make every effort to improve. The concept guiding everyone is that there should be no surprises.

**“Managing expectations”
is the performance
management process.**

What About the Worse Case Scenario: The Bad Review

A bad review can be devastating. A bad review that is right about your performance should be preventable—if you’ve done everything we’ve been recommending. But if it is right, take it to heart. Especially if your job is in

jeopardy, be honest with yourself and learn; you’ll know where and how you need to improve.

A bad review that is wrong, on the other hand, usually means that there has been a misunderstanding and miscommunication—and you need to take corrective action. This usually means, at the very least, meeting with your boss, and being well prepared. Have as much documentation as you can to support your case, but probe to understand how the boss arrived at his or her view of your performance. By the end of the meeting you need to know:

- Can the appraisal be revised? Will the boss change his or her mind?
- If not, has the appraisal already been passed on to human resources?

If the appraisal stands as part of your record, and you remain convinced that it contains mistakes and misjudgments, it is appropriate to write a rebuttal. But you want the rebuttal to be as positive in tone as possible. Instead of dwelling on what is not true—to the extent of repeating negative wording from the appraisal—use your extensive records and documentation to show what you have accomplished. There may be cases when the boss is out to get you unfairly—based on politics, grudges or personality conflict. Your arsenal of information can help to overcome this. Keep a special file, by the way, of positive evaluations that have come your way, *e.g.*, rave reviews from customers and notes of appreciation from colleagues. Being well prepared means that you can diminish the power of a bad boss to demean your performance, and he or she may end up not having the last word.

The Delicate Balance

Everyone wants to get along with the boss; as I mentioned earlier, he or she is one of the most important people in your life. But the imbalance of power can put a strain on getting along. The boss has more power than you do—your fate is in his/her hands. And, of course, there are many different kinds of corporate cultures, and many different

kinds of bosses and attitudes regarding the use of power. Much of the things I’ve been suggesting may seem wildly improbable or implausible in your workplace.

You can help with the appraisal process by keeping bosses continually informed.

But a balance of power means collegiality: everyone working and pulling together so that power is not so obvious on the surface. Collegiality is the fundamental principle that undergirds the boss/employee meeting to set goals and objectives. Reactive employees have usually approached the boss’s desk with a parent-child model in mind (perhaps the most classic example of the imbalance of power). Proactive employees, on the other hand—career-minded professionals—approach the boss’s desk with an adult-adult model in mind and are more likely to bring collegiality about. Whatever type the boss may turn out to be, employees who are able project a take-charge demeanor with respect to their jobs and their careers are more likely to win the confidence of the boss—and make progress toward their Forty-Year Vision. ●

Dwight Clarke first became aware of the Five O’Clock Club as a client. He attended the Club and used the methodology to make a successful transition from an international tax accountant to his current career in human resources development and as a career coach.

Dwight is a frequent speaker at organizations such as Columbia University and Baruch College. He has also made several local and national television appearances with our president, Kate Wendleton, on shows such as Good Morning America and the Metro Channel.

During 2001-2002, Dwight was also the National Executive Director for Workforce America, the not-for-profit arm of the Five O’Clock Club that operated in Harlem.

He holds a B.A. in accounting and business practice and an M.S. in social work administration from Columbia University.