

Original podcast here:

http://traffic.libsyn.com/occupationalolivia/Episode_6.mp3

The Art of Managing Up

Introduction by Olivia Gamber: Hey, guys. You are going to love this week's episode. If you've ever struggled to get into your boss' head or you aren't one of those people who knows how to manage up, then you will definitely want to tune in to episode 6 of the Occupational Olivia Podcast. Our guest today is Alison Green. Alison is the founder of AskaManager.org, where she answers readers' questions daily on workplace and management issues. Ask a Manager receives more than two million visits each month and has been recognized as a *Forbes* "most influential career site." And the site has been featured in *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Business Insider*, *Inc*, and I could go on and on. What's most interesting about Alison is she used to be a chief of staff for a national non-profit lobbying organization where she oversaw day-to-day staff management and was in charge of hiring, firing, and all of that management duties. And then she decided to venture out on her own, and, for the past eight years, she's been running AskaManager.org, consulting, and writing weekly columns for US News and several other large publications. You're definitely going to love her perspective on how to manage up so be sure to tune in now.

Olivia Gamber: So, Alison, I'm really excited to talk to you, and I'm a big fan of the AskaManager.org, and I really can't wait to get into how do you get into your manager's head, and how do you manage up? But before we dive into all of that, you have an interesting story yourself, and I wanted to dig into that first. So how did you go about really starting... it looks like, based on your LinkedIn profile... you were the chief of staff, and now you are doing what you are now, so could you tell us a little bit about your story and how you got there?

Alison Green: Yeah, absolutely. So I was working as the chief of staff for a national lobbying non-profit. I was doing the day-to-day managing of the organization and the hiring, and I was seeing people make mistakes that I thought were easily avoidable and which often stemmed from just not quite understanding how most managers think and what they care about. And I've always been full of opinions and like to share them so I thought, "You know, I'm going to start a blog. I'll do it for a couple of months. I'll give some advice. I'll get it out of my system, and that'll be that." So I started Ask a Manager, and it pretty quickly turned into basically a Q&A format, where I would answer readers' questions about everything from getting along with your manager to dealing with annoying co-workers to applying for jobs, asking for a raise. And I figured it had a lifespan of like six months at the most, and then there'd just be no more questions to answer. But questions kept coming in, which surprised me. And then after a couple of years of running it, the site was doing well enough that I thought that, hm, maybe I could cobble together the blog, and some outside consulting, and some additional freelance work that stemmed from the blog, and actually

be able to quit my job, and just do a combination of all of those things. And I thought, “You know, I’ll give it six months. It probably won’t work out, but I’ll just give it a shot and see what happens.” And that was in 2010, and I’ve been doing that ever since.

OG: That’s amazing. That’s huge. So you were able--so you took a pretty big leap there it sounds like.

AG: I took a big leap in the middle of the recession, no less, so looking back at it, I kind of wonder what I was thinking. But I will say that I’m terrible at marketing. I’m terrible at pitching myself. If my success relied on doing those things, I would be probably homeless. The blog was really instrumental in laying the groundwork for this whole plan to work, and to allow me to do in a way where I really didn’t have to do much marketing. And it was really lucky in a lot of ways. I mean, I really hadn’t started it thinking I could monetize it, or that it would even pay off professionally, for that matter. And it was really just a hobby that blew up.

OG: That’s interesting, because so many people now are trying to get into blogging and figure that out, and it seems like it... sounds like it... I’m sure it’s not... it wasn’t really that simple, but it sounds like it was very seamless for you. And why do you think that was?

AG: It’s funny. I mean, I had no strategy. *[audio fades out]* I didn’t do any of the stuff you’re supposed to do, like search engine optimization. I didn’t do any of that. Honestly, what I did, and this sounds ridiculous, but I just put out content that I would want to read. I love reading blogs. I love reading advice columns. I find the minutiae of how people interact really fascinating, so I just put out material that I would find interesting to read, and I feel like what has happened is that my people, who feel the same way as me about that kind of thing have over time found the site.

OG: Nice. It is very conversational, like you’re talking to your friend, so I definitely could see that. And I’m curious now. You publish a lot of content. Is that just you behind there?

AG: It’s just me. I write pretty quickly, which is a big advantage, when you’re doing this kind of thing. And I also publish basically first drafts, which regular readers will tell you that they spot typos. So my *[audio fades out]* has always been I would rather put more content out there, and maybe not have it be 100% polished, so I do, usually during the week, I do four posts a day. If I were really polishing things up, it’d probably be less than one a day, so my tradeoff is I just want to get the content out there, and people seem reasonably happy with that tradeoff.

OG: That’s interesting. No, that’s amazing. Four a day? Wow. Okay. That’s good to know. Do you get a lot of questions? And of all the questions, what is the biggest theme you’re seeing?

AG: I do get a lot of questions. I used to try to answer everything that people sent to me, even if I wasn’t going to publish it, but I just wanted to respond to everyone. It’s past the point where

that's realistic to do. I would just do nothing but answer questions all day. So I just deal with the guilt of not answering everyone. But as far as the biggest theme, there are a couple. One is so often my answer comes down to... okay, you have this problem with someone, whether it's your boss or your interviewer, or maybe not your interviewer... your boss or a co-worker. Have you told them? Have you told them what you object to, and what you would like to see happen differently? And so often the answer is no, that the person just hasn't been straightforward with the person who's causing the problem, so that's one big theme. And the other one that I think really is what prompted me to start the site to begin with is just people not quite understanding how their manager or their job interviewer thinks--the things they care about, how they want problems presented to them, what kind of candor they want. So many of the letters that I get stem from just confusion around that. I think it's a really mysterious area for people.

OG: That's interesting. So I'm curious about this first one. Do you ever get kind of frustrated, where you're like, "Really? You haven't had the conversation?" I mean, it's interesting, because I notice that, too--people resist conflict, and so instead they're looking for some other answer other than communicating, and how do you address those questions?

AG: Yeah, people definitely want a magic wand or a potion or something that will let them have their problem solved without them having to have a potentially awkward conversation. It would be easy, I guess, to get frustrated by it, but I know that it's hard. I mean, it's easy for me to say from an objective distance, "Hey, you need to talk to this person," but I know from my own life that when it's you it can be tough to do it, and it's natural to look for a solution that maybe doesn't require you initiating a tough conversation. I think a lot of times it's helpful for people to hear, "You know, you can decide that you don't want to have the tough conversation. You can decide that you're just not up for doing that, but then that means that the tradeoff is you have to live with this thing, so which is more important to you? Do you want to get it solved, even though the price is going to be a tough conversation, or is it worth it for you to just not have to deal with that and put up with whatever the thing is that's bugging you?"

OG: Exactly. So when you see those themes, and it sounds as if you're pretty straightforward with your answers, do you ever hear back from those people after they've had those conversations?

AG: I do. It's actually one of my favorite parts of running the site. I love hearing back from people about whether they used the advice and how it worked out for them. I will say that I get a lot of updates from people where the update is they didn't use the advice. So you're still pretty unhappy or they've just decided to change jobs, but I do also hear from a lot of people who did have the conversation, and it worked out pretty well, and that's really gratifying.

OG: I bet that is. So the second piece it looks like is now people know how to get in their manager's head or the hiring manager's head, and it sounds like it's all about the skill of managing up, and really what does that even mean? That term is thrown around a lot. How would you define it?

AG: Yeah, I think a lot of times when people think about managing up, it feels as if maybe it's about manipulating your boss in some way, but it's really not. I mean, it's just about working with your boss in a way that will produce the best outcome, the best results for you and for your team, and make your and your manager's lives easier. It's really about figuring out what are the outcomes that you want here, and what is the best path to get you there.

OG: So how do you recommend people go about getting in their boss' head, and where do they start if you're really clueless. You have no idea what they're thinking.

AG: Yeah, so... it means something that I really--I don't want to be promotional--but it is something that I really work to do through Ask a Manager. I think people who read the issues that we talk about there and the reader letters that we discuss--I think that it can be pretty helpful in gaining some insight into how managers think. And the other thing I think if you read materials that are geared toward managers, it can really help you understand how managers think. I always tell people this for job searching, you know, people who are job searching often read an awful lot of advice that is targeted toward job seekers. What they don't do is usually is they don't read advice that is targeted toward interviewers, but that will give you such good insight if you read advice for interviewers on how to conduct a good interview, on the employer side. You learn so much about what your interviewer probably cares about, what they're assessing, and what they might be holding against you. So I think when you have that target that you're trying to understand better, if you read materials geared toward them, it can really give you a lot of insight. You know, the other thing I would say about managing up is you want to get really clear in your own mind about what you do and don't have control over. And this is this pitfall that people really lose sight of, I think. They'll end up stewing over some behavior of their manager's that they just can't change. And it's a lot more productive to understand that your boss' working style may not change dramatically, and you're not going to be able to make her into a different person. So you've got to figure out "Can I find a way to work effectively in that context?" or "Is this going to drive me crazy, and I'm not going to be able to accept it and maybe I need to think about whether it's time to move on?"

OG: That's a good point, because at the end of the day, your boss has less motive to adapt than you should, since they're the boss, right?

AG: Yeah, and I mean a good boss is going to want to try to accommodate you to a certain point, but ultimately, yeah, if there's a question of whose preferences are going to trump whose, hers are probably going to win out, but it doesn't have to make you miserable, which is something that I'm always trying to convey to people in letters at Ask a Manager. It doesn't have to be beating your head against the wall with frustration or stewing every day or dreading coming to work. Sometimes if you can just accept, you know, "There's lots of things I like about my job. I have a short commute. I'm paid well. My work is interesting." Whatever it might be. You can accept that part of the package is that it comes with a manager who has the few annoying habits that drive me up the wall. That's not going to change. "I'm making the decision that I

value all of these other things enough that it outweighs my frustrations with my boss, and I'm staying because I'm making that tradeoff." Sometimes that can give you real peace of mind. I think it gives you a feeling of control back. You don't feel like a bad situation is being done to you if you have a difficult boss. You feel like "I'm making this decision because there are good things I'm getting out of it."

OG: That's good--focusing on the positive, and accepting and actually making the choice to stay, because ultimately if you're that miserable, you control if you're going to continue down that path.

AG: Exactly. If you're choosing to be there or not, if you're choosing to continue to stay, you should just get really clear on what your reasons are.

OG: I like that--getting out of the victim mentality, right?

AG: Exactly.

OG: So a lot of people that are following and listening right now--they are the types of people that want to grow in their role. They're looking for growth. And obviously your manager, to some extent, is in between your projects or what type of growth you get to see in your current role. How would you recommend they approach their boss to have these conversations if, especially a boss who doesn't seem very interested in their career.

AG: I say bring it up yourself. So often people will wait for their boss to create an opening, and then if it never comes they just feel really frustrated, like their manager has let them down, but you don't have to wait for them to create the opening. I mean, if you have regular check-in meetings with your manager, you can bring up the topic at one of those. Or if it seems like your boss does better with advanced notice of topics, you can send an email that says you'd like to talk with her about how you might grow in your role and ask if you can get some time on her calendar in the next two weeks to talk. And, really, very few managers are going to say *no* to that. And then once you do that, once you set that meeting up, you want to make sure--you've asked for the meeting--so you want to make sure that you're coming prepared to lead it. Don't just kind of sit back and hope that she's going to take the reins from there. Know what you want to bring up, whether it's asking for advice or asking for new projects or more responsibility or asking for a promotion or what you would need to do to earn a promotion, but it's completely reasonable to initiate that conversation yourself, and you shouldn't be afraid to do that.

OG: I think that's good advice, because managers have a million priorities, and it's not that they're intention is to ignore your career. It's just really difficult to weave that in on top of everything else on their plate.

AG: Absolutely, and I think people tend to personalize all of this. “Oh, if my manager isn’t initiating a career growth conversation with me, it must be because she doesn’t care, or she doesn’t think I have potential.” It’s so rarely that that is really the explanation. It’s much more likely that she’s really busy and she’s stretched really thin, but that she’d be glad to talk to you if you brought it up.

OG: Exactly. So if you were entering this conversation, and you just wanted to take on more interesting projects, but you also want your boss to know about it, really when you think about it that way, you’re really just taking on more work, so why do you think people fear going into these situations more, because you’re really adding more value to your boss, right?

AG: Yeah, I think people fear that they’re going to be told *no*, so that’s a rejection, and no one likes that. They fear that the boss is going to think that they’re not good enough, which is also, again, a rejection. People don’t like it. They’re just worried. I think it’s tricky whenever you’re in a situation where there are power dynamics as there certainly are with an employee and a manager. You feel like that person has something you want, and you can’t guarantee that they’re going to give it to you. That’s nerve-wracking.

OG: That’s so true. Do you have a lot of millennials that follow your site, and do you see a difference in their expectations of their manager, because I’m sure you’ve seen a lot of buzz in the media about that, and I’m curious what your perspective is.

AG: This is sort of a pet peeve topic with me, because I think it’s really not about the millennial generation. I think it’s about amount of experience and that, with any generation, when you have people who don’t have a ton of work experience, you see a lot of the things that millennials get accused of in the media. It’s nothing specific to millennials. It’s specific to being twenty-five, and having just a couple of work experience under your belt. I don’t think a lot of the allegations that you see about millennials in the media—I certainly don’t see it with most of the people who write into me. I certainly don’t see it with most of the millennials who I work with. If anything, millennials are more likely to be grateful for the work experience that they’re getting. I mean, so many of them graduated into the midst of a terrible recession. Contrary to not wanting to pay their dues, which is what the media likes to say about them, most of them are dying to pay their dues and wish someone would give them the chance to do it.

OG: Yes, absolutely. So that kind of brings me to my next question. Obviously, you know, working in a work environment, it’s not really how hard you work and how much you work. It’s really the perception of really your value, so how can you go about marketing yourself to your boss, or even other important people in non-sleazy way. How would you recommend it?

AG: I think, you know, this is going to sound so straightforward that it's not even especially insightful, but I really think just keeping your boss in the loop on what you're doing, where you're having successes, and progress you're making toward the goals that hopefully you have in your role. It doesn't have to be a big, sleazy self-promotional thing, which most people are understandably uncomfortable with. It can just be "Hey, here's what I've accomplished this month or this quarter. The next goal I'm setting out for myself is X, Y, Z." Or, "Hey, wanted to let you know that the client I met with yesterday told me she loved the presentation that we did." Sometimes people feel that, oh, that might be too much like bragging, but your boss is going to be really thrilled that your team is getting that kind of feedback, and you're arming her to be able to better present her team to her own boss, and good managers want to be kept in the loop like that. I mean, I think there are just a lot of people who feel like it's going to come across as bragging or arrogant, but to your manager, you're just keeping her updated.

OG: I like that, because you're really just taking the angle of--and it's not really an angle at all--it's just proactive communication.

AG: Exactly.

OG: I think that's good for people that are uncomfortable marketing themselves. They can just reframe it in their mind.

AG: Uh huh. It's just keeping your boss in the loop.

OG: Yup. Okay. So, I have a question for you about asking for money. This is a big one, and I'm sure you've gotten a lot yourself, but when is the right time to ask for more money. Let's pretend you're operating way outside of your job description, and how do you go about it? How do you know when and how to do it?

AG: Yeah, so, in general you want to wait at least a year since your last raise or since you were hired, unless you are truly doing a whole new job. But beyond that, when you have a sustained track record of accomplishment that you can point to, it's reasonable to ask that your salary be readjusted to reflect that. And you really want to keep in mind that a raise is recognition that you're doing a good job. It's acknowledgement that you're now contributing at a significantly higher level than when your salary was last set, so if that's true, and if it's been true for a sustained period of time--not just like the last week you worked really hard--but a sustained period of time, then it's reasonable to make that pitch. And, as far as the exact timing, it certainly doesn't hurt to wait until a moment when your fantastic performance is especially fresh in your boss' mind because you just did something truly amazing. That's always a good time to ask. And I will say that if you're anxious about asking, which most people are, it's helpful to remember good managers want to keep good employees, and if your request is reasonable and it's backed up by your value to your employer, a good manager is going to try to work with you to keep you happy, and even if

they can't say *yes* right now, you can always ask what you'd need to do to get a *yes* in the future, and a good manager should be able to tell you. And if you get a kind of wishy-washy answer, and you come away feeling like "Hm, I have no idea what it would actually take to earn a raise here," then that's good information about whether this the right place for you long-term.

OG: Nice. So have you gotten people who have asked and it blew up in their face, that have sent you a note?

AG: No, I haven't. I mean, I can predict some situations, where it would blow up in someone's face. If you ask one month on the job--you just got hired a month ago, and now you're asking for more money, and I do sometimes have people write to me and say, "Can I do that?" and I always tell them, "No, you can't do that." [*audio faded out*] Or what else can blow up in your face when you're asking for a raise? I mean, if you're not doing well, if you're not performing at a high level, asking for a raise is going to come across as pretty tone-deaf. So it just goes back to really making sure that you can put together a case for why you're worth more.

OG: Exactly. The only situation I can think of is--you didn't negotiate on the front end, and then later you find out that your peers are getting paid maybe a little bit more than you, and so maybe you feel that you're owed more.

AG: Yeah, so that's really tricky. If you were just hired recently, and then you realized, "Oh, crap. I left a lot of money on the table," that's really tough, because at that point you have already agreed to do the job for the salary that you negotiated, so in that case I would say use the advice that we talked about--wait a year, spend that year really demonstrating that you're worth more, excel at what you're doing, and in the meantime, for your peace of mind, try to remember that you were actually presumably happy with the salary you're getting until you learned that more was possible.

OG: Yes, that's easier said than done, I'm sure.

AG: Absolutely, and I guess the one other caveat I would put there is if you are getting the sense that there is a gender dynamic, that men in your organization are being paid more across the board than women, I would not say you have to wait a year to bring that up. I mean, that's about pay equity, and that's a totally different issue, so I don't want to inadvertently give the impression that I'm saying people in that situation should just keep their mouths shut for a year.

OG: That's a good point, definitely. Okay. So, another question I have for you is in the past personally I have made mistakes with getting a little too friendly with direct reports, and I'm curious what your perspective is on how to navigate that line between being open and too open with your boss with the friendship thing.

AG: Yeah, I think it's a really hard thing to accept when you first become a manager, especially if you start managing pretty early on in your career. But, yeah, you can't really have a friendship between a manager and an employee. You can be friendly. You can have a really warm, friendly relationship. You just can't really be friends. When you're on the employee side of the dynamic, you want to remember that no matter how well you and your boss get along, no matter how much you might actually be friends if you didn't work together, this is the person who is charged with evaluating your work and with giving you feedback and deciding on your pay and who conceivably have to lay you off or fire you some day--you know, hopefully that won't happen, but she needs to be able to do it if it comes to that. And, those dynamics do not make for a healthy friendship. You know, you really don't want to be receiving very serious critical feedback from the person whom you were talking about your dating life with over drinks last night. That's uncomfortable for everyone. People tend to think, "Oh, I'm the exception to this. I'm very mature, and I can handle this really well," and everyone thinks that until the moment until it suddenly becomes really hard to do. But you can absolutely have a really warm, friendly, collegial relationship with your boss, and you can share things about your personal life to a point, if it's that kind of culture, but you're doing both of you a big favor if you keep some professional boundaries in place.

OG: Yeah, it is tough, because, now that I think about it, what if you've got a situation where you were peers, and then you are now managing this person, and you happen to actually be friends with some of those peers. Do you kind of have that conversation with them that "Hey, our relationship's changing," or do you let it speak for itself?

AG: I tend to err on the side of just be really transparent explicit about everything. I tend to find that it's easier to just put it out there, because if you don't, then it becomes a problem, and you have to talk about it later. It's so much more awkward if you haven't had that initial conversation. So I do think it is true that becoming a manager is hard for so many reasons, and this is absolutely one of them. The relationship is going to have to change, and if you don't recognize that, or if the people you're managing don't recognize that, it's just a recipe for disaster. And, you know, even if nothing goes terribly wrong, even if you're both really mature, and you navigate it beautifully, other people won't necessarily know that, and it can look like favoritism to other people. It can look like you can't possibly be being impartial, because you're getting drinks with this person you're managing all the time, and not with anyone else on your team. So there's a perception issue that you've got to think about too.

OG: That's true. I can totally see that. So you've really got to be careful about managing perceptions, and that means you really can't spend the same amount of time with them, which is sad.

AG: It is sad. It sucks, frankly. And I think it's something to think about when you're applying for a promotion that would have you managing peers. You want to really make sure that you're ready to make that tradeoff.

OG: Yup. I can relate to this situation. My last question for you is how can we learn more about you, and what are you working on right now?

AG: So, as you know, I run Ask a Manager, which people can visit at askamanager.org. Some of the posts there have recently started getting syndicated by *Time* and *Money Magazine* and *Fast Company* and some other business magazines. [*audio fades out*] which is cool, too. Yeah, anyone who wants to know more should just head over to askamanager.org, and check out what I'm doing over there.

OG: Okay. Perfect. We will link to it at the bottom, and thanks again, Alison. It's been so great talking to you.

AG: Thank you so much, Olivia. I enjoyed it.

Yes, the above was all human-transcribed. Just for kicks, this is how Google Voice "transcribed" the first couple minutes of the show:

Rob This is Uncle you getting me about the tag we were out one of these people how to manage at definitely wanted sick of you acting like ass. okay. I was going to clean. I'll ask me I forgot or wishing you a few questions Billy also replacing the management asking me to receive appointment William mark and his recognizes the forbes most influential call from your site, and the site is been featured in USA today the wall street Journal business insider ink, and I could go on it on which most interesting about Allison used to be that you need to stop for a national non-profit organization where she oversaw oversaw me today staff management and wouldn't charge for hiring hiring. She decided to venture out on her own and for the past 8 years. she's been running asked me if your dog word consulting and Fridays beazley calling you and couple other bart publication you're definitely going to purpose I could not have made the job to be sure to tune in now. So alex and I'm really excited to talk to you, and I'm a big fan of the ask of me an acre got or I can I want they can't wait to get into really just have you getting your managers card and how do you manage job before we dive into all of God did you have an interesting story yourself, and I wanted to dig into that first so how do you go about really starting? I looks like based on your linked in profile you in the change of stuff and now you're doing what you are Martha Can you talk a little bit about your story, and how you got there? Yeah, only asked so I was working, but she just after national lobbying dot profit. I'm doing the day today managing at the organization and the hiring and I was thinking all make mistakes that I thought work easily avoided ball.