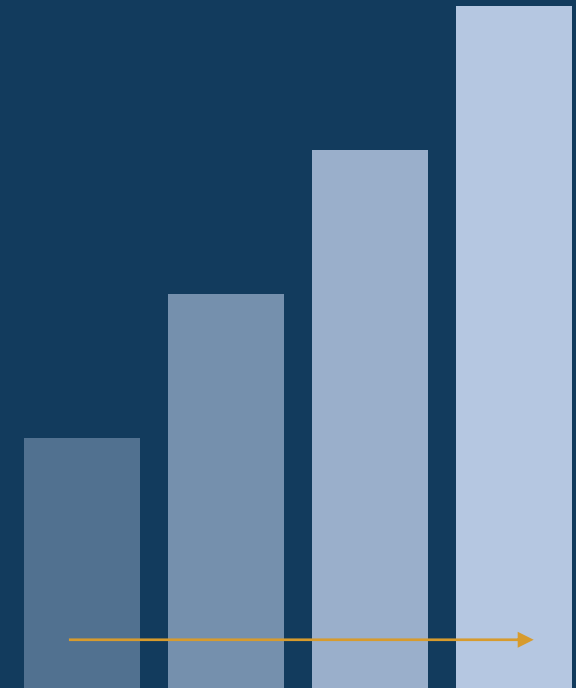


Managing Upwards

How to help those above you make better decisions for your department, discipline and institution

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Understand → Translate → Influence



Influence without title inflation

What I mean by managing upwards?

Not submission. Not manipulation. Not constant escalation.

- Understanding how decisions are really made above you
- Making it easier for senior colleagues to say yes - or at least not yet
- Translating local needs into institutional choices
- Protecting trust while still being candid

Managing upwards is the disciplined practice of making your boss more effective in your context

What “managing upwards” is — and is not

Managing upwards is not flattery, lobbying or endless escalation.

It is the disciplined work of understanding the world above you, translating your case into institutional terms, and reducing friction for decision-makers.

Not this

- Trying to “win” every argument
- Making it only about your department
- Forwarding volume instead of judgement

Instead

- Understanding priorities and constraints
- Offering options, risks and recommendations
- Helping the institution make better choices

Three points for the talk



- Know what matters above you
- Make the strategic case, not only the local one
- Arrive with options and a recommendation

The aim is not to manage personalities; it is to improve decisions.

A simple reality check

What looks obvious from a department is rarely simple at executive level.

From the department

- The need is urgent and specific
- The case feels intellectually clear
- Delay looks like lack of commitment

From the centre

- Everything is urgent and competing
- Every yes has an opportunity cost
- Precedent, politics and timing matter

Lessons learned - usually the hard way

The habits that improved my odds of being heard.

- Lead with the institutional problem, not your departmental solution
- Bring options, not a single preferred answer
- Never surprise your line manager on a big issue
- Bad timing can kill a good proposal
- One trusted conversation beats ten performative complaints

Three questions before you go upward

These could improve both clarity and tone.

1

What problem am I really asking them to solve?

2

What evidence will matter to them, not just to me?

3

What would make this easy to back in the room I am not in?

Speak to these points, not to everything

A good upward message is selective.

- Risk: what happens if we do nothing?
- Value: what becomes possible if we act?
- Evidence: what data or example changes the conversation?
- Options: what are the feasible routes and trade-offs?
- Ask: what exactly do I need from this person now?

The translation matters

Our arguments can be strong - and still miss the audience.

What we often say

- We need more pure and/or applied maths capacity
- Our workload is unsustainable
- Mathematics underpins everything

What leaders may hear more clearly

- Student demand, quality and retention are at risk
- Current model is constraining delivery and growth
- Maths is a platform discipline with measurable institutional leverage

Disagree well

Managing upwards is tested most when you think the answer is wrong.

- Choose honesty over twisting the issue or bending the truth
- State the risk clearly, once, and with evidence
- Offer a workable alternative if you can
- Do not keep refighting a decision in every corridor
- Protect the relationship - you will need it again

A small case study pattern

The same issue can be framed two very different ways.

Less effective

- We are overloaded and need two posts now
- Other departments have had more investment
- This is unfair and unsustainable

More effective

- Current staffing model risks NSS, progression and research delivery
- Here are two costed options and the trade-offs
- I need your steer on which route is most defensible institutionally

Translate local needs into institutional value – concrete examples

Move from “my department needs...” to “this helps the institution by...”.

<u>Typical departmental ask</u>	<u>Translate into...</u>	<u>So your message becomes...</u>
“We need another lecturer.”	Quality protection, growth capacity and delivery resilience.	“A targeted hire protects quality, supports growth in data/AI demand, and reduces delivery risk.”
“Our service teaching load is too high.”	A cross-institution bottleneck affecting engineering, computing and the sciences.	“Under-investment in mathematics creates hidden constraints across STEM.”
“We need better space / timetabling.”	Student experience, operational efficiency and room for priority growth areas.	“A space / scheduling efficiency improves both experience and throughput.”

A provocation

The issue may not be that senior leaders do not understand maths.

Perhaps the harder truth is this:
we have not always learned to present mathematics as
institutional strategy rather than disciplinary virtue.

What I would leave with you

Five habits worth practising this term.

- Read the pressures above you before you press your case
- Frame asks in institutional language without losing disciplinary conviction
- Bring evidence, options and a clear ask
- Disagree early, privately and constructively
- Invest in trust before the crisis meeting arrives

Questions for discussion

Or: where does managing upwards feel hardest in your setting?

- What upward conversations are you avoiding at the moment?
- Where does your department struggle most with translation into institutional language?
- How do you stay candid without becoming oppositional?
- What has worked for you when the first answer was no?