

# Sycophant Syndrome- Handling the Handlers



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By definition, sycophants try to get what they want by excessively praising or complimenting, or by making a person feel attractive, important, talented and powerful. There is a touch of sycophant in all handlers who work with talent; managers, agents, attorneys, personal assistants, anyone acting as the “go to” person for the rich and famous. Handlers wield power through proximity. The closer someone is to power, the greater the opportunity to leverage that power for control and the greater the temptation to cross ethical, moral and legal lines.

Handlers are usually industry professionals but can also be parents, spouses, family or friends. The degree of sycophantic behavior they use often correlates to the effectiveness of a handler. It often makes the difference between a functional working and successful relationship and one that can, at the most extreme, strip the rich and famous of everything; money, health, power and even life itself.

One look at a magazine cover, a tabloid headline or an online news feed and the painful truth is obvious; that often the temptation is just too great to pass up, that handlers are caught red handed stealing money, hurting their clients by withholding, filtering or altering vital information or passively standing by while clients hurt themselves.

Client/handler relationships are supposed to be fiduciary in nature meaning that they are predicated on trust; unadulterated, transparent and seamless but it seems that not even professional experience, blood relationships or long term friendships provide guarantees when it comes to trustworthiness.

When handlers cross moral, ethical and legal lines the usual motivation is just plain old greed but there may be other, more insidious issues at play; a pathological need to live vicariously through the fame and power, obsession with their charge, perhaps substance use is in

play or maybe it's a touch of the old Pygmalion mindset (for those who don't know what that means watch "My Fair Lady" or "Pretty Woman" on Netflix). A Pygmalion mindset is based upon a distortion of contribution whereby the handler takes on the persona of the creator or puppet master of his or her "charge." And to make matters worse, famous people have a penchant for bad behavior and handlers must always do the right thing which is to call them on it and possibly risk being fired for telling the truth or travel on the dark side, toss ethical and moral precepts to the wind, stay silent and keep their job. Good intentions often pave the road to hell. Good handlers must possess an unshakeable moral compass and the intestinal fortitude to speak truth to power no matter the topic. Unfortunately and frequently many fail miserably at it. How do you tell someone that signs your paycheck that their wildly expensive wardrobe item is hideous or the guy they are dating is stealing from them, or that their performance sucks or that they cannot go out in public high as a kite?

Are the handlers, the sycophants, part of the solution or are they actually the problem? Do they cause or mitigate damage? Do they care more about their own position more than the person that they work for? Do they set up clients to fail only to come to their rescue in

an attempt to make themselves irreplaceable? Some handlers actually suffer from a creepy permutation of Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy where they cause problems only to save their clients and draw attention to their selfless care and ability to handle things? No matter the impetus when a handler goes rogue the situation usually ends in disaster; the poor house or the grave for the client and the jail house for the handler. How ironic, the rich, the famous, the powerful are easily rendered powerless by a team of people who are hired to empower them. They powerful are often reduced to helplessness to insure the job security of their handlers. Let's not forget, handlers have access to all sorts of super charged and "privileged information;" bank accounts, family secrets and assets. They run the show and can easily ruin the show if left to their own devices.

So, it's never too early for an individual with their sights set on fame to think about the kind of person that they want working for and with them. Advisors and handlers are vital components of a healthy and successful career. When you start to get traction and things heat up you really cannot do it all yourself but be careful because the unsavory characters, both familiar and unknown will begin to crawl from under rocks and out of the woodwork to come to your rescue.

The people who you hire will have a profound impact on your quality of life, health, wealth and happiness. They must be strong enough to tell you the truth and you must develop thick skin and be objective about yourself, your talent and the state of your career.

Handlers must believe in their ability to manage things as much as they believe in you and your talent. They should support you in your belief of yourself. They should be fearless in their pursuit of what is best for you without compromise. You must be strong enough to take criticism and not put yourself up on a pedestal only to dare people to knock you off it.

To be a handler is to be a filter, someone to get through to reach the person of power or fame. But sometimes filters block vital information along with the useless kind. Good judgment must prevail. You need to know what is going on, have all the facts and you should not be spared a moment of necessary discomfort. It is OK to be uncomfortable. It is temporary. It will pass and you will learn from it. What doesn't kill you will indeed make you stronger, says Nietzsche. There can be no hidden agendas, only ones that you set and control for yourself. Handlers should insulate but not isolate or cause you to become detached, out of step with the real world or ill equipped to handle your own affairs and live independently.

When is it time to hire a handler? The answer is simple; when the amount of activities gets to be too much, when there is no time to breathe or eat. It's time when the moving parts are unyielding; constant accounting and legal questions, wardrobe and image requirements, press and personal appearance schedules, when the moving parts have multiplied exponentially. Don't forget to celebrate too because you have made it, your career is taking off.

But pause and breathe. Learn and absorb; first take the time to understand all you can about the business and your role in it; second figure out how you want to conduct your life and career so that you can guide your handler; and finally hire a handler that you have investigated, researched and referenced. Don't be lazy. Do the business yourself and learn how it's done before you turn it over to someone else to do for you. Wait until it is absolutely necessary no matter the outside pressure, the countless recommendations, and the "connected" people courting you. And when the time is right choose wisely. Your choice could change the entire trajectory of your career.

Camille Barbone is an entertainment industry professional with over 20 years of experience. She has worked for major companies such as Sony and Universal, Warner Chappell and other major

publishers. She has owned two state of the art recording studios, developed and managed high profile artists such as Madonna, produced major concerts and provided music for major motion pictures such as Wes Craven, Steven Spielberg Productions and Cinepix Films. She has conducted numerous seminars, panels and workshops at SXSW, the New Music Seminar and other entertainment conferences. She has been featured in many books and has appeared on many news and talk shows. Camille coaches and consults via her company, Camille Barbone Coaching and Consulting, a business that provides guidance and structure to individuals and companies aspiring to success in the Entertainment Industry. Contact Camille at [camille@camillebarbone.com](mailto:camille@camillebarbone.com)