

Be a Better Boss: 5 Critical Mindsets

“Learn from the mistakes of others. You can’t live long enough to make them all yourself.” ~ Eleanor Roosevelt

Ninety percent of us work for someone else, regardless of our seniority or status. As with great works of art, we have learned to recognize good bosses when we see them, but their specific qualities may prove difficult to define.

The word “boss” is often used interchangeably with “leader,” “manager” or “supervisor,” and it conjures up memories of the good, the bad and the ugly ones we’ve endured throughout our careers. The boss is the authority figure who has direct and frequent contact with subordinates – the “head honcho” responsible for personally directing and evaluating work.

Stanford University management professor Robert I. Sutton, PhD, author of the New York Times bestseller *The No Asshole Rule*, knows about bosses. He has received thousands of emails about the bad ones since the 2007 publication of that title. In his most recent book, *Good Boss, Bad Boss: How to Be the Best...and Learn from the Worst* (Business Plus, 2010) Sutton focuses on what it takes to be a better boss.

“Devoting relentless attention to doing one good thing after another – however small – is the only path I know to becoming and remaining a great boss,” he writes. “I wish I could promise you that the path was easier.”

Whether you’re the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, a restaurant owner, athletic coach or store manager, your success depends on how well you deal with the people who surround you. In any position of authority, great or small, you are expected to personally guide, inspire and discipline.

Anytime you have more power than others, you must interact in productive ways – especially when facing strong emotions and gut reactions. A boss evokes feelings of confidence and comfort, as well as insecurity, fear, anger and confusion, in every communication medium: face-to-face meetings,

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telephone calls, emails, text messages and video conferences. Emotions can intensify when relationships are inherently unequal.

In many situations, the boss-employee relationship requires that you work “up close and personal,” which means you’re exposed to others’ quirks, foibles and habits. To benefit your team and company, you must excel at accepting differences and finding workarounds.

There are no magic bullets, and the work may seem relentless. Besides getting things done and meeting performance objectives, you must shepherd your people through every hard turn. Your principal rewards for success are keeping your job and receiving even more responsibilities and challenges.

The best bosses keep chipping away at a huge pile of tasks – some interesting, others dull but necessary. Their leadership prowess is measured by how well they handle the frustrations associated with people and performance.

Killer Bosses

Bosses also have bosses. In the United States alone, their ranks have swelled to an estimated 21-38 million. Even CEOs answer to boards of directors and shareholders.

Myriad studies prove the link between a boss’s effectiveness and team performance. Having a good boss may also increase longevity: A Swedish study that followed 3,122 men for 10 years found that those with the best bosses (considerate, clear and proactive change agents) suffered fewer heart attacks than did those with bad bosses. Study participants who stayed with good bosses for 4 years had at least a 39 percent lower heart-attack risk, according to coauthor Anna Nyberg, PhD.

Personality-assessment specialist Robert Hogan, PhD, researched studies of diverse workers conducted in 1948, 1958, 1968 and 1998 in cities like Baltimore, London, Seattle and Honolulu. In his meta-analysis of postal workers, milk-truck drivers, schoolteachers and other members of the labor force, 75 percent reported that dealing with their immediate supervisor was the most stressful part of the job.

Over the last 30 years, Gallup surveys of more than 100,000 employees in 2,500 diverse businesses have revealed that one’s immediate boss has far more impact on engagement and performance than any other factor.

A 2007 Gallup survey of U.S. employees found that 24 percent would fire their bosses if given the chance.

Indeed, 56 percent of disengaged employees cite bad bosses as a primary reason for their unhappiness. People don’t quit their jobs; they quit bad bosses.

Good bosses create employee satisfaction that leads to retention, performance, productivity and profitability. How you treat your direct reports creates a ripple effect that travels down and across your company’s hierarchy, ultimately shaping its culture and performance.

A study of 66 of the fastest-growing new U.S. firms shows that the best CEOs blend a top-down directive approach with a participative shared-leadership approach when managing their top teams.

5 Mindsets of a Great Boss

Bosses shape how people experience work: joy versus despair, enthusiasm versus complaints, good health versus stress. Most bosses want to be good at what they do, yet many lack the essential mindsets that precede positive actions and behaviors.

As a boss who strives to do great work, you must adjust your thinking. The beliefs and assumptions you hold about yourself, your work and your people will determine your actions, according to Stanford’s Sutton.

“The best bosses embrace five beliefs that are stepping stones to effective action,” he writes.

Mindset #1: Goldilocks Management

Managers who are too assertive will damage relationships with their superiors, peers and subordinates.

Conversely, those who aren’t assertive enough will fail to inspire their teams to strive for stretch goals, according to a study conducted by business professors Daniel Ames, PhD, and Francis Flynn, PhD (of Columbia and Stanford Universities, respectively).

Ames and Flynn speculate that the best bosses would receive an “average” rating from subordinates if measured in competitiveness, aggressiveness, passivity and submission. Stanford experiments confirm that micromanaging employees with relentless attention and advice usually undermines their efforts.

There are times when bosses need to coach people, discipline, communicate direction and intervene. The savviest bosses look for the right moments to apply pressure or encouragement to get the best out of their people. In choosing their moments, they command respect instead of contempt.

Mindset #2: True Grit

“Gritty bosses are driven by the nagging conviction that everything they and their people do could be better if they tried just a little harder or were just a bit more creative,” Sutton writes. Such bosses instill grit in subordinates. Without creating the impression that everything is an emergency, great bosses have a sense of urgency. They are dogged and patient, sensing when to press forward and when to be flexible.

As Albert Einstein once stated: “It’s not that I am so smart; it is just that I stay with my problems longer.”

University of Pennsylvania Assistant Professor of Psychology Angela Duckworth, PhD, and her colleagues define grit as perseverance and passion toward long-term goals.

“Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest despite failure, adversity and plateaus in progress,” they wrote in a 2007 *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* paper.

Without becoming discouraging, bosses with grit believe that progress isn’t always good enough — that you can never stop learning or rest on your laurels.

Mindset #3: Small Wins Count

If you set big goals to energize and direct people, you can fall into the trap of overwhelming and discouraging them. The path to success is lined with small wins. Framing goals as a series of small steps helps people see the importance of their participation.

Smaller goals also help people make better decisions, sustain motivation and manage stress. When subordinates experience a challenge as too big or complex, they can freeze up. When problems are broken down into bite-sized pieces, a boss inspires clarity, calmness and confidence.

Mindset #4: Avoid Power Traps

Numerous studies show that people in power tend to become self-centered and oblivious to what their subordinates need, do and say. To compound matters, your staff will carefully scrutinize everything you do and say. These two phenomena merge into what Sutton calls the “toxic tandem.”

Wielding power over others can cause you to:

1. Become more focused on your own needs and wants
2. Become less focused on others’ needs
3. Act as though written and unwritten rules don’t apply to you

This isn’t the case with only a handful of personality types. Most people in power positions will adopt these tendencies; it’s human nature.

Good bosses remain on guard to avoid such power traps. They never forget how closely they are watched by their people, and they resist taking advantage of their position and ignoring others’ needs.

Mindset #5: Provide a Human Shield

Great bosses protect their people, going to bat for resources and support. Even when they may suffer personally, great bosses are willing to take such risks. They shield their employees from red tape, meddlesome executives, nosy visitors, unnecessary meetings and a host of other time wasters.

“A good boss takes pride in serving as a human shield, absorbing and deflecting heat from superiors and customers, doing all manner of boring and silly tasks and battling back against every idiot and slight that makes life unfair or harder than necessary on his or her charges,” Sutton writes.

You know you’ve been successful when your subordinates believe you have their backs.

The Questions to Ask Yourself

1. Goldilocks Management

- a. Are you managing with just the right degree of assertiveness?
- b. Are you creating ways to walk the line between enough intervention and micromanaging?
- c. Are you neglecting to give your people guidance, wisdom and the feedback they need to succeed?
- d. Are you obsessively monitoring every move and metric?

2. True Grit

- a. Do you treat work as a marathon or a sprint?
- b. Do you look for quick fixes?
- c. Do you instill a sense of urgency without treating everything as a crisis?
- d. In the face of failures, do you persist or give up?

3. Small Wins

- a. Do you frame what your people need to do as a series of small, realistic and clear steps?
- b. Do you propose grand goals?
- c. Do you break things down into bite-sized steps?

Questions to Ask Yourself to Be a Better Boss, continued

4. Power Traps

- a. Do you remind yourself that your people are watching you closely?
- b. Do you avoid doing little things that undermine their performance and dignity?
- c. Do you ignore the little things that could be perceived as overuse of power?
- d. Do you realize that everything you say and do will be magnified in your subordinates' minds?

5. Human Shield

- a. Do you see your job as caring for and protecting your people?
- b. Do you fight for them when necessary?
- c. Do you consider it too much trouble or too risky to battle superiors on their behalf?
- d. When your people screw up, do you take the hit or hang them out to dry?



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