

Becoming a Better Boss by Robin Porterfield

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Dallas, TX: Over the years, we have surveyed our clients about the best boss they ever had and why he or she was the best boss. Chances are you will recognize the person described here - that very imperfect person who was your best boss.

What we knew we would not find: the "Perfect Boss" found in management textbooks.

We have all read about ideal bosses - those men and women who know how to manage in one minute, make ideal decisions, are eternally patient, always adjust their management style to the needs of others and manage to perfectly balance micromanagement without neglect. They never lose their tempers, always empower and - oh by the way - don't exist.

What we did find: The best bosses were far from perfect.

Our respondents shared that at times their bosses would avoid conflict too much, were too interested in consensus over speed and too open did the work themselves instead of delegating. As in previous surveys, the interesting finding was not only the breadth of shortcomings, but also the shortcomings that were conspicuous by their absence. In previous surveys, formal and informal, we have heard "temperamental," but never heard "bored." We have heard "impatient" but not "lazy." We have done this type of surveys through the years and the results are rarely surprising, but still refreshing.

The best bosses sounded very much alike.

While the shortcomings of the best boss varied widely, the strengths had an uncanny similarity - here are some direct-quote phrases that came up: Was a cheerleader; was a good listener; was honest with me; wanted me to advance; accepted responsibility; took me to meet clients' communicated a vision; always answered my questions; included me; valued my input; helped me to learn; cared about me; and was a boss I tried to please.

Who are you like?

Are you the businesslike person who "manages by best-seller" and who stays in your office thinking about crating intricate strategy? Are you the stern taskmaster who makes your will known and expects your people to, a la Captain Picard of the Enterprise, "make it so?" If so, you may be many things - including successful - but chances are that you are no one's "best boss ever."

On the other hand, if you have a myriad of shortcomings and don't know if you match

any of the textbook virtues, don't despair. Are you there to listen and answer questions, help your employees learn, help them improve and let them know you are interested in doing things that help their careers? So you may under delegate, get too involved with detail, communicate poorly in some areas etc. If you take a few minutes a week thinking about what you can do to further a subordinate's career, a lot of those shortcomings are going to be overlooked.

Early in my career; I actually had a boss who sat down at my desk and said, "Now that I've got you to help me with my career; what can I do to help yours - let's talk." Unheard of right? No, but uncommon. The point of the story?

I remember it vividly. Was the boss perfect? No. But time and again we find that it's not only the grand gestures, but also the "little stuff" that "doesn't matter" that stands out in people's minds and hearts.

Why care?

If it hasn't already become clear; there are huge benefits inherent in being a good boss. We can take just a few behaviors off our list to illustrate. Employees who work for a good boss will work harder, which makes the boss look good. As consultants who deal with successful and unsuccessful leaders every day, we have yet to hear. "All her people thought she was a great boss, but she failed." If you are willing to really listen to others, you benefit from their ideas, opinions and solutions. By valuing the opinions of those around you, your idea pool expands that much more.

Admitting you're not perfect and owning up to your mistakes actually makes life easier by reducing the stress that comes with perfection. And let's not forget that when you build an atmosphere of trust, you increase communication and pre-emptive problem-solving. People are much more likely to share news with you, both good and bad. And who among us hasn't been sideswiped by bad news? We could list 100 other ways being a better boss will make your life easier, including that being the best boss you can be is the right thing to do.

Do you see yourself in this column? If you do, great! But if you're not that boss you'd like to be in an upcoming column we will focus on how to become that "good boss" that people still talk about years later.