



RESEARCH & IDEAS

Being the Boss

Published: January 17, 2011

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Nineteen years ago, Harvard Business School professor Linda A. Hill wrote the first edition of her book *Becoming a Manager*, detailing the experiences of several first-year supervisors who were making the daunting transition from star performer to novice boss. Since then, she has found that the now-classic book is popular not just among newbies but also among leaders with decades of experience.

"Unless you manage the context in which your team resides, there's no way that your team can be successful."

a fair number of them derail or kind of get stuck."

Hill specifically targets that audience in her new book, [Being the Boss: The 3 Imperatives for Becoming a Great Leader](#), cowritten with Kent Lineback.

"This book was written to benefit experienced people who are trying to go from good to great," Hill says.

Being the Boss describes the challenges that good bosses face as they endeavor to manage themselves, manage their networks, and manage their teams. In short, being a good boss is about much more than wielding authority.

"I've seen so many people get that wrong," says Lineback, himself a former executive. "They think authority defines them. I've had bosses who had to resort to saying, 'I'm the boss!' And when you get to that point, you've lost it."

"I've always been surprised by why on earth they're reading a book about becoming a manager," Hill says. "What I've come to understand is that many of them never really made the psychological transformation from being an individual contributor to being a manager, and it really resonates with them when they read the book. Many of them are not fulfilling their potential. They're well intended, but

Executive Summary:

Striking the right balance between good management and good leadership is a daunting but necessary challenge for anyone endeavoring to be a good boss. In *Being the Boss: The 3 Imperatives for Becoming a Great Leader*, Harvard Business School professor **Linda A. Hill** and former executive **Kent Lineback** discuss the steps to take and the roadblocks to avoid in order to meet that challenge. Q&A with Hill, plus book excerpt. Key concepts include:

- You have three key imperatives as a manager: manage yourself, manage your network, and manage your team.
- Formal authority on its own will fail to influence people and get results.
- It's important to manage your relationship with your boss, if only to avoid powerlessness, which can be as corruptive a force as power.

In the following interview, Hill talks about the difficulties of striking a balance between management and leadership in the age of globalization and remote offices.

Carmen Nobel: *Your book discusses three imperatives for becoming a great leader: managing yourself, managing your network, and managing your team. What are some of the issues inherent in each of them?*

Linda Hill: It starts with using yourself as an instrument to get things done. And because you're the instrument, you've got to know that instrument very well and use it appropriately, so that your imprint matches your impact. We talk a lot about what it really means to be the boss. For instance, although you do have formal authority, you don't want to have to rely on that too much to get things done.

Managing your network is in the middle of the book, before the section on managing your team. That kind of throws some people because when you think about being the boss, you mostly think about the people who report to you. But unless you manage the context in which your team resides, there's no way that your team can be successful. So you have to understand the political dynamics, you have to understand how to build a network with peers and bosses, and you have to set the right expectations for your team and the right resources. We really think that's at the heart.

The last piece is your team. That's about all the complexities of what it means to build a team—a team is different from just a group—and how you think about managing the performance of individuals. We also talk about preparing for the future—that managing isn't all about today, it's also about managing your team for tomorrow.

Q: *You include a chapter called "Don't Forget Your Boss." Managers often fail to realize their role in their relationships with their bosses. What do they need to keep in mind?*

A: It's common to let the person up the chain be most responsible for whether you have a healthy relationship, but you're equally responsible. If you don't manage that relationship right, your team is not going to be able to do what it needs to do.

Powerlessness corrupts as much as power. You shouldn't feel powerless with your boss. That's not the deal. You have to figure out the sources of power you have to influence the boss. You also have to see the boss as human and fallible in all the ways that you're human and fallible, and figure out how to deal with the reality of who that person is—rather than the ideal of what you'd like that person to be like. There are really bad bosses, and you can't be naive or cynical about this. It's hard to be successful with a bad boss, and sometimes success means figuring out how to get out of that situation. But before you decide that's the deal, you need to take responsibility for the relationship, because it's definitely two-way. I'm building on the traditions of [HBS professors emeriti] John Kotter and John Gabarro, who [in 1980] wrote an article about managing your boss, which was very radical at the time. (<http://hbr.org/2005/01/managing-your-boss/ar/1>)

Today many people have multiple bosses, and we also discuss the challenges there. One of the most common missteps is to deal with the boss who's closest to you physically and treat your relationship with your other boss as out of sight, out of mind. So we talk about how you have to manage the priorities between those two bosses and how to negotiate what will be your priorities, given their priorities.

About Faculty in this Article:



Linda A. Hill is the Wallace Brett Donham Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School.

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Q: Due to technological advances and globalization, more and more managers find themselves leading, collaborating with, and reporting to colleagues in remote offices—people they rarely if ever see in person. What challenges do they need to consider?

A: When I teach executives, we talk about how you give feedback virtually to people you'll never see in person—giving performance appraisals to people you never see and understanding the complexities of that, and understanding the limitations of e-mail and telephone calls. We really rely on nonverbal cues, generally, to help us understand the credibility of the message. For instance, to tell whether I'm telling the truth, you'll listen to my tone, you'll look at my face. We're prepared by evolution to read the whole person and figure out whether that person is credible.

Often you're dealing with the fact that the person is not only far away but might be of a different culture as well. And you've got to figure out how to interpret him or her. So what we have to explain is that when you don't have those nonverbal cues, then you have to realize that it's really an impoverished method of communication. You can't act like it's face-to-face communication when it isn't. We all know, because we've experienced it, how fast conflict can escalate with e-mail because the nonverbals are not there.

When you're building trust virtually, it's really important that you deliver on what you say you're going to do. If you tell someone [in a remote office], "By four o'clock on Wednesday afternoon you'll have X," it matters more that you actually get it [done] on time, because that person will use those cues to figure out whether you're trustworthy rather than the nonverbal cues that are not available. Whereas, you might tell someone down the hall that you'll get something to him by 5 o'clock next Thursday, but when the deadline approaches [and you haven't completed it], you can go [to his office] and say, "You know this other thing is happening, can I get it to you tomorrow?" And he can read you in person.

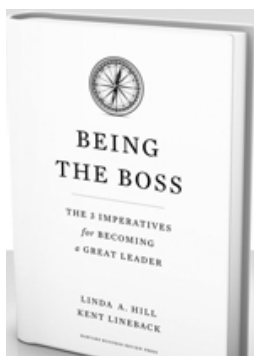
Another tip is that when you're working virtually, silence does not indicate agreement. So you have to actively inquire more than you would with a face-to-face interaction. On the phone I can't see whether you're shaking your head, so I have to ask, actively, if everything is OK.

Q: What are you working on next?

A: My next book is on leadership for innovation—on what kind of leadership is most appropriate if sustained breakthrough innovation is what you need to be doing. The key to competitiveness these days is not just about having the right strategy but also about being able to do these breakthrough innovations more than once.

Book excerpt from *Being the Boss: 3 Imperatives for Becoming a Great Leader*

By Linda A. Hill and Kent Lineback



"I'm the boss!"

It's a common mistake to think management is defined by formal authority—the ability that comes with a title to impose your will on others. In fact, formal authority is a useful but limited tool.

People Want More Than a Formal, Authority-Based Relationship with the Boss

Many managers—especially those who were achievement-driven stars as individual performers—don't even think about relationships. They're so task oriented that they put the work to be done and their authority as boss at the heart of what they do and assume they can ignore the human aspects of working with others. ¹

The problem is that most people don't want your authority to be the be-all and end-all of the relationship. They want a personal, human connection, an emotional link. They want you to care about them as individuals. They want you to encourage their growth and development. Research tells us this kind of human relationship with the boss is a key factor determining an employee's level of engagement with the work. ²

We know of a small-company owner, a warm, decent woman, so pressed for time she consciously decided to avoid small talk at the office. She never opened up to people about herself or asked about their lives and interests. She didn't, that is, until her people rose up and expressed, through an intermediary, that they hated how she treated them. They wanted a real human connection with her, even if she was "the boss."

The Limits of Formal Authority

Most managers soon discover, often to their dismay, that authority isn't very effective for influencing people and getting results.

Your Formal Authority Often Fails to Produce Compliance

You may think people are perverse or stubborn, but there are many reasons they don't always follow your instructions.

They disagree with you. They think there's a better way and feel free to exercise their own judgment.

They think something else is more important. It's up to you to set deadlines and make your priorities clear.

They don't understand what you want. Making directions more and more explicit can only go so far. Most work today requires some judgment and thought, and so it's almost impossible to give instructions specific enough to eliminate all misunderstanding or cover every contingency.

They find circumstances have changed, invalidating your directions and forcing them to improvise.

They dislike being bossed around. Peremptory orders given in a tone of voice or choice of words that's belittling only invite minimal compliance or subtle disobedience. As someone told us, "I fixed my boss. I did exactly what he said to do." Be aware that some people are especially sensitive to "being bossed around." They bring to work a history of troubled dealings with authority figures. By the time you meet them, they've accumulated a set of ambivalent and even negative feelings about authority, which they apply to you and any instructions you give. At the extreme, these are the people from whom a simple directive can produce angry resistance.

People may have a view of authority that differs from yours. They may bring to work generational or cultural attitudes that lead them to distrust and question authority. That will make them less likely to comply. This is not personal. It's simply a different point of view that you and they will need to work through. As companies and work groups become more diverse, these differences will appear more often.

Finally, people may not comply because they're confused. The growing complexity of the workplace and more fluid organizational structures with multiple bosses and temporary teams can complicate and blur lines of authority. Many employees may be confused by what seem to them conflicting demands and expectations.

Also, in virtual teams with members spread far apart, distance diminishes the ability of formal authority to create compliance. It's easy to forget about a boss 3,000 miles away, especially when there's another just down the hall.

All of these reasons create a workplace in which authority is at best an uncertain means of influence.

Your Formal Authority by Itself Cannot Generate Commitment

You need more than people's simple compliance. You need them to be engaged with their work and want to do it well. You can command how your people spend their time, even where they direct their attention, but you cannot decree what's essential for good work—you must win their commitment by winning over their heads and hearts.

When you rely primarily on your formal authority, you're fundamentally managing through fear—fear of the consequences of disobedience.

Fear is a limited, ultimately corrosive and demeaning way to get what you want from others. It certainly will not generate personal commitment or real engagement with the work and the team.

Your Formal Authority Cannot Create Genuine Change

Change often brings uncertainty, loss, and pain for those it touches. Yet those are usually the very people who must embrace the change and make it work. Real solutions can only come from those involved, and real change requires that they alter not only their behavior but their thinking, assumptions, and values as well. Authority cannot compel such change.


Your Formal Authority Is Less Likely to Elicit People's Knowledge and Insight

Every individual in an organization possesses knowledge, skills, and new ideas of potential value. (If they don't, it's your responsibility to replace them with people who do.) Managing people primarily by exercising your formal authority—by telling them what to do without truly seeking their input—is far less likely than a more open approach to capture that full value. Insisting on "I'm the boss!" places a huge burden on you. The head of a large high-tech company told us of a discussion she once had with her head of HR. Her company had installed a program to encourage broader participation in decision making, and she was frustrated that product development seemed to be moving too slowly.

"Maybe we have to go back to the old command-and-control system," she said.

"If that's what you want," said the HR person, "I'll help you. But there's one problem. You have to be right all the time."

Laughing, the CEO said, "I'll never forget what he said. I told him, 'That's never going to work.'"

No one person can possibly possess the knowledge, experience, and wisdom needed to make every decision. Organizational success today requires the involvement of everyone at all levels. Less authority-driven organizations are more likely to elicit and take full advantage of the talent and experience of their people. 

About the author

Carmen Nobel is the senior editor for *HBS Working Knowledge*

Footnotes

1. See, for example, David C. McClelland and David H. Burnham, "Power Is the Great Motivator," *Harvard Business Review*, March-April 1976, 100-110; and Scott Spreier, "Leadership Run Amok," *Harvard Business Review*, June 2006, 72-82.

2. See, for example, Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994), 263-266; Joan Magretta, *What Management Is: How It Works and Why It's Everyone's Business* (New York: Free Press, 2002), 195; and Rodd Wagner and James K. Harter, 12: *The Elements of Great Managing* (New York: Gallup Press, 2006), chap. 3.

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Reader Comments:

1. I most definitely agree with your last comment of "organizational success today requires the involvement of everyone at all levels." This statement could not be any truer, especially now.

Today's workforce needs to feel they can make a difference and ultimately contribute to the success of their organization. A great boss knows this and builds upon it. The old-fashioned hierarchy of times past has fallen by the wayside. The cultural difference between 1970 and 2010 is immense. Today's bosses are more in tune and communicate better with their employees. They are certainly still respected; maybe more so given the latitude they allow their employees to get the job done. Bosses who allow employees to take the initiative and work with others to get things done build alliances and loyalty a traditional authoritative boss could only dream of. Entrusting employees with seeing their way through projects and tasks is critically important to team building.

Employees who feel powerless and reigned in by bad bosses will never be team players. They've already been excluded from the process and regrettably the organization will ultimately suffer, in one way or another. If only more 'bosses' were forward thinkers and willing to think outside the hierarchy/authority box, how much more could be accomplished...if only.

Thanks for the article. I really enjoyed it.

Amy Hanenburg

*Asst Controller
Southfield Corp*

2. Managing the political aspect of organization is often overlooked. Many business schools do not even consider it seriously. I am of the opinion that books such as *The Art of War*, *The Prince*, *The 48 Concise Laws of Power* should become the staple of managers. Organizations are dynamic organisms of ever changing power plays, ploys and nexuses.

The other challenge I agree with is when people transition from being managed to managing. Many assume that it brings an automatic transformation and the required competencies and mindsets somehow magically appear.

Sometimes new managers and leaders need formal and informal trainings, certifications, coaching and mentoring to move from where they were to who they should be. Of course these have limitations, experience is also a good teacher but one needs to be reflecting and learning proactively from others and using all that to adapt quickly on the job as they read the people, contexts and organization that they are operating in.

I also loved the article and will search for the book.

Wisdom Chitedze

Head of Internal Audit

3. in my experience with people, i have always belived that there is no Boss around. if one has to be a boss they have to earn it. times have changed, days have changed, the law has changed with us. this means that the word BOSS has changed with time. this call for a new way of leading and management. if one has to bring success annd a reputation of success to his/her organisation, they have to be willing to work hard much harder than the rest. to me being a boss means being a servant of all and giving your best effort to the activities of the organisation. its about being a rele model in both character and effort.

today we truely need a new definition of being a boss. great topic. i will really search for the book as it is the best working tool for the training manager and all work force

Matthews Daniel Kapito

Mathews Dannie Kapito

DIRECTOR

Notebook Solutions inc Malawi chpt

4. The comment "organizational success today requires the involvement of everyone at all levels," is very true but is often ignored especially in the industry of education. Teachers (trained to teach) suddenly find themselves in positions of management without any training or skill base on which to call upon. They are suddenly transformed into a world where they have to manage rather than being managed, it's no wonder many fail. The educational system at present trains teachers not managers.

Paul

Director

CONSENS

5. I agree with the approach to leadership and management as illustrated in the interview, however, I wonder whether the same approach could be applied successfully in a military setting.

It would be interesting to evaluate & compare the effectiveness in the approach in a sample military setting against a sample corporate one.

Thanks I enjoyed the read and will definitely get the book

Moses Okundi

Anonymous

6. Its a reality that being summoned as a boss in an organisation does not imply you automatically become a great leader, rather as postulated managing the greater context where your team resides is an important factor that makes a leader who delivers results. Human relations and interpersonal skills are of pragmatic importance for team leaders as they enable talent in the organisation to deliver success. Of equal importance is that people don't need to be bossed around but rather letting your team work, realise and make use of your source of power as a boss to establish their potential maximises team effort and organisational development and company profitability.

Very interesting and useful insight in deed.

These are my favourite points i can extract from the interview:

1. It starts with using yourself as an instrument to get things done..
2. Powerlessness corrupts as much as power...
3. When you're building trust virtually, it's really important that you deliver on what you say you're going to do.

I think Linda Hill 's next book will also enjoy immense success as she propells this brilliant idea that "The key to competitiveness these days is not just about having the right strategy but also about being able to do these breakthrough innovations more than once" Linda Hill on Leadership for Innovation.

These are very good books to have on the shelf for constant revision.

Henry Maigurira

Executive Secretary

Pachi Development Foundation

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7. I think to be effective leaders have to do a tremendous amount of listening . Listening to everyone whatever level they be without becoming emotionally involved and with enough restraint to supress the urge to react and show knee jerk reactions.The information so collected will reveal patterns in people's behaviour which will enable the leader understand them and more important predict their reactions. The act of listening also conveys that people are worth the leader's time and attention. It takes a lot of effort but I found that it helps build a connect with the team . Also it alerts the leader to possible behind the scenes political power plays .

Renu Iuthra

Director

Galgotias Business School ,India

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8. As a consultant to CEOs and an educator for emerging leaders, I resonate with the first building block of effective leadership you name, namely a strong foundation

in self-knowledge. The application of insights gleaned from the on-going work of self-mastery is a vital asset that grows in value in direct proportion to the altitude of the role. More traditional practices and trappings of power over others as a basis for leadership are a great temptation, particularly for young leaders moving from individual contributor to manager roles. Yet they eventually discover either rapidly or over the years (the hard way), that "power over" has its limits, and that great performance of organizations, teams and individuals comes from using yourself as an instrument of energy and inspiration in others. Thanks for your clear articulation of some very important ideas that are often overlooked. Ulrich Nettesheim, Managing Partner, Passages Consulting

Ulrich Nettesheim

*Managing Partner
Passages Consulting*

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9. Helpful and accurate insights about the challenges of Formal Authority. Expressions of direction and decision from hierarchal structures need a regenesis from new paradigms for systems to progress from stasis to vitality.

Dale Schultz

*Lead Pastor/Chief Spiritual Officer
St. Philip's United Methodist Church*

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10. The very term "Boss" seems on the face of it somewhat of an autocratic, dominating character with an aura of scare around him. Bossism is usually considered to be a negative characteristic and hence bosses are generally despised. Once a subordinate becomes a boss, he is expected to assume the role of a hard task master devoid of humane approach. I remember when I joined a large financial organisation over four decades back the boss would arrive to work much earlier than others, go to his chamber and remain only there till late when it was time for departure. For days and days we longed to see his face but this was possible per chance if we were still in office at the late hour beyond the boss's departure time. The boss's body language was normally stiff and a smile on the face was a rarity. We used to wonder how he would be behaving with his family and others. Work-personal life mismatch was noticed. When I, equipped with an MBA(HR) degree, became a manager, my boss guarded me against getting closer to the subordinates and extracting work by being mild. His pointed advice " What they taught you during your MBA is mere theory which you had got to remember to pass the tests but in practice all that does not hold. You have to be hard rather than cool." Notwithstanding what I was told my approach as a boss was quite different. Ample opportunity was provided to juniors for them to show their worth. They were given full scope to grow. And, fear of the boss was given a back seat. With all these, a close watch on performance was kept and adequate guidance for improvement wherever needed was offered. Judgements were based on objectivity and performance based incentives were given. In due course, I became a friend, philosopher and guide and enjoyed great respect - this in fact was mutual. I dare say I succeeded and have nothing against, rather welcome, treating every human being as such showering love, respect and blessings. Being a good boss is need of the present times when the employees are full of knowledge, common sense, intelligence, diligence and enthusiasm of a high order. However, they seek deserved recognition and humane approach. Why deny all this?

Kapil Kumar Sopory

*Company Secretary
SMEC(India) Private Limited*

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11. As a South African and being so extremely diverse in the 11 different cultures in our Country and having to catch up with the developing world over the past decade has thought us so much about how to deal with people from all over the world, hence our successful world cup and continued amazing growth togetherness.

I believe being a leader in South Africa is bond to teach you many important lessons about handling people in all aspects.

Remi

Unemployed

None

12. Ms.Linda's article identifies an important yet pathological addiction among the lower management cadre who germinate over the years in a "Tell-me-what-I-should-do-and-I-will-do-it" cultue rather than energising themselves to think from a boss's angle. By the time these people graduate in to next management level this forms the foundation of work culture which takes a few valuable years to level out. This process continues till they reach the top level. In the process the foundation becomes he building!An edifice is as strong (week) as its foundation is! Hence there is a famine of managers who are strong in conceptual/competency to lead organizations. It is also pertinent to note very few managers make a conscious attempt to build "bosses" among the followers which also becomes an organizational culture. It is also worth noting that responsible business leaders also overlook the importance of "concept groomi ng" of the followers creating a vacuum in the process. This is going to be an area of concern and Linda's efforts is a right step in that direction.

Santhanam Krishnan

Assistant General Manager

A large Bank, India

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