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What Amazing Bosses Do Differently

by Sydney Finkelstein

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We all know that job satisfaction often hinges on the quality of the relationships we have with our bosses. Yet in today's rapidly evolving, 24/7 workplaces, it's not always clear what managers should do to create the most satisfying work experiences and the happiest employees. My research into the world's most successful bosses has unearthed some common practices that make work much more meaningful and enjoyable. If you supervise others, make sure you do the following:

Manage individuals, not teams. When you're under pressure, it's easy to forget that employees are unique individuals, with varying interests, abilities, goals, and styles of learning. But it's important to customize your interactions with them. Ensure you understand what makes them tick. Be available and accessible for one-on-one conversations. Deliver lessons cued to individual developmental needs. And when it comes to promotion, look past rigid competency models and career ladders for growth opportunities tailored to the ambitions, talents, and capacities of each person.

Dr. Paul Batalden, a professor emeritus at Dartmouth College's Geisel School of Medicine, who previously worked under Tommy Frist at healthcare giant HCA, told me that his former boss was "such an unusual CEO" of a company that size. "You could always get to see him. He always had time." Samuel Howard, another Frist protégé who is now CEO of Xantus Corp, added, "when you asked him to do something, he would roll up his sleeves" and work with you to get it done.

Go big on meaning. Most employees value jobs that let them contribute and make a difference, and many organizations now emphasize meaning and purpose in the hopes of fostering engagement. But this is also the manager's responsibility. You can't rely on incentives like bonuses, stock options, or raises. You've got to inspire them with a vision, set challenging goals and pump up their confidence so they believe they can actually win. Articulate a clear purpose that fires your team up, set

expectations high, and convey to the group that you think they're capable of virtually anything.

Legendary bosses like Bill Sanders in real estate, Julian Robertson in hedge funds, and Bill Walsh in professional football all communicated visions that entranced employees and left them hell-bent on success. Scot Sellers, a protégé of Sanders who went on to become CEO of Archstone before retiring in 2013, recalled that his former boss “would lay out his vision and say, ‘I would like you to be a part of it.’ You were so honored to be asked... that you just wanted to jump in and say, ‘Sign me up!’”

Focus on feedback. A 2013 Society for Human Resource Management survey of managers in the U.S. found that “only 2% provide ongoing feedback to their employees.” Just 2%! Many bosses limit themselves to the dreaded “performance review” and often mingle developmental feedback with discussions about compensation and promotion, rendering the former much less effective.

As I've [written elsewhere](#), some organizations are changing their ways, but even if yours sticks with traditional reviews, you can still supplement that with the kind of continuous, personalized feedback that the best bosses employ. Use regular—at least weekly—one-on-one conversations to give lots of coaching. Make the feedback clear, honest and constructive, and frame it so that it promotes independence and initiative.

Hedge fund manager Chase Coleman remembered that his former boss and backer, Tiger Management founder Julian Robertson, was “very good at understanding what motivated people and how to extract maximum performance out of [them]. . . . For some, that [meant] encouraging them, and for others, it [meant] making them feel less comfortable. He would adjust his feedback.”

Don't just talk... listen. Employees tend to be happiest when they feel free to contribute new ideas and take initiative, and most managers claim

they want people who do just that. So why doesn't it happen more often? Usually the problem is that bosses promote their own views too strongly. Employees wonder: "Why bother taking risks with new ideas when my boss's views are already so fixed?"

The best leaders spend a great deal of time listening. They pose problems and challenges, then ask questions to enlist the entire team in generating solutions. They reward innovation and initiative, and encourage everyone in the group to do the same.

Football coach Walsh went out of his way to encourage input not only from his assistant coaches, but also from the players themselves. He did this before the game, during the game, and afterwards when watching game film. This more collaborative approach probably had something to do with his track record with the San Francisco 49ers: six division titles, three NFC Championship titles and three Super Bowl wins.

Be consistent. Who could be happy with a boss who does one thing one day and another thing the next? It's hard to feel motivated when the bar is always shifting in unpredictable ways and you never know what to expect or how to get ahead. So be consistent in your management style, vision, expectations, feedback and openness to new ideas. If change becomes necessary, acknowledge it openly and quickly.

Kyle Craig, who worked with restaurant impresario Norman Brinker at Burger King in the 1980s, remembered his boss's consistent humility. "He was never unwilling to admit his failures and mistakes, which puts people around him very much at ease." Bill Walsh, meanwhile, came across as consistently confident. As former 49ers wide receiver Dwight Clark remarked, "There was just an attitude. He walked with a strut almost—not cocky, just very confident." These superbosses had dramatically different approaches, yet both worked well because they were consistent.

No behavior a boss adopts will guarantee happy employees, but managers

who follow these five key practices will find that they will help improve well-being, engagement, and productivity on any team. The common denominator is attentiveness. Pay close attention to your employees as individuals. Take that extra bit of time to build their confidence and articulate a vision; to provide constant, ongoing, high quality feedback; and to listen to their ideas. And ensure that your own messages are consistent. Is it hard work? Yes. But it's worth it.

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