"But what can be done about our bosses?"

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Abstract

Bosses, who have far more power and influence over their staff than they realize, often fall far short of what is needed or desired. Motivations to become bosses are not always good, and appointing committees are sometimes at fault. Bosses tend to be insecure, isolated and insulated from the views of their staff, and can dominate without realizing it. Types of boss can be represented by caricatures, which are often illuminating. Staff readily identify the qualities that are ideally needed, but understand that they are not often attainable. There are few easy solutions to an inadequate boss, except to remove him or her; but, with an acceptance of their non-perfection and a real desire to listen and learn, bosses can gradually change. There are signs that the situation is gradually improving.

Introduction

I have conducted seminars on management in various parts of the world, mainly for librarians and mainly for staff just below the level of boss. The management of people – so-called human resource management, a term which seems to put it at the same level as stock management – always plays a large part in these events, and always arouses greater interest than anything else. The need to motivate and involve staff is prominent; and during discussion inevitably demotivation and exclusion come up. At the end of these sessions, someone nearly always says in one way or another: "We have understood all you have said, and agree wholeheartedly. But what can be done about our bosses?"

I reply that there is a lot that staff at all levels can do to help themselves, and I sometimes add that they may occasionally, and unconsciously, use the boss's supposed opposition as an excuse for inertia. But I do not always feel very convinced by this myself. I know that there are limits to what they can do without the boss's support, and sympathize with their frustration.

These opening paragraphs may evoke the image of the boss as a sort of ogre, a mini-Robert Maxwell, who bullies his (or perhaps her – ogresses are no better than ogres) staff mercilessly, dominates the whole system, exercises control over everything everyone does and rules the place like a concentration camp. There may indeed be a few such people left, but they are, fortunately, a dying species. The problem of the boss is much wider than that. The fact is that bosses rarely realize how much power they have, whether they like it or not, even if they deliberately try not to exercise it. In fact, they have very little idea what effect they are having on their staff or the library as a whole. They tend to live in an unreal world as far as their own organizations are concerned. In directing their attention and efforts largely towards the parent bodies, they neglect the organizations they are in charge of.

I say this as one who was a boss – of three libraries – over a period of 20 years. I hope I was not a bad boss, but my experiences as a consultant in the last seven years have opened my eyes, and there are a number of things I would do differently now. Why do even the best bosses often fall so short of excellence in

managing their staff? And why are the worst so extremely damaging?

How and why do people become bosses?

Let us look at how and why people become bosses. One motivation is a genuine belief that one has something to contribute which cannot be done at lower levels; this can lead people of high ability to seek managerial responsibility. Another, much less worthy, motivation is a sense of self-importance, expressed in a manner that captures the attention of some appointing committees; most of us can think of bosses who seem to have been raised upwards by a balloon filled with the gas of self-importance. A poorer motivation still – nearly always an unconscious one – is a basic feeling of insecurity, with which the person tries to deal by getting into a position of power over others. Many dictators have been very insecure people – and became even more so when in power, as they came to feel increasingly isolated and threatened by others. A desire to manage people and get the very best out of them is much less common; indeed, getting power over people may be a compensation for not being able to get on with them. Very rarely do people want to become bosses because of a consuming interest in people.

The wrong sort of boss is sometimes due to the appointing procedure or committee. Committees often do not know what they really want, let alone what they need. They may look for a docile servant rather than a forceful leader – or a forceful leader rather than a participative manager. Often few members of appointing committees have much knowledge or experience of management, so it is not surprising that errors are made. In any case, interviews are hardly an ideal way of deciding whether or not a person is right for the job.

Common deficiencies of bosses

Once in position, the boss may learn a lot about some aspects of bosshood, but his – I use "he" and "his" as shorthand for "he/she" and "his/her" – less desirable traits will generally get worse. If he is afraid of staff or does not relate to them easily, he will tend to shut himself away. If he is self-important, the deference shown to him will reinforce this. If he is insecure, he will cling to the trappings of office and keep a distance from staff. He judges himself by his performance on committees, etc., rather than as a staff manager. He welcomes the invitations he is bound to receive to join various external committees which give a feeling of importance and form a pleasant and justifiable distraction from trying to manage the library. After a while the total time he spends away from the library in attendance on committees and at conferences becomes longer than the time he spends in the library. This might not seem a bad thing – the absence of some bosses can be highly cost-effective; but often no decisions of any significance can be taken in his absence and, if they are, they are liable to be overturned when he gets back.

Isolated and insulated as they generally are, bosses are prone to various forms of self-delusion. They commonly believe that the place is running smoothly and that there are few problems apart from shortage of money. They think that staff are contented, with the exception of a few malcontents and trouble-makers, that staff respect them and even admire them. When they wander round the building they think that everyone is pleased to see them. They believe that they have transformed the library since their arrival. Some or (rarely) all of these things may be true, but whether or not they are the boss tends to believe them. After all, to believe anything else would shatter their often frail self-esteem. It takes a very confident boss to admit to fallibility and be open to persuasion by staff that he is wrong on particular issues.

The trouble is that it is extremely difficult for bosses to know how they are viewed and what they are doing wrong. No one will tell them, even if they are personal friends outside work – no one, that is, except a consultant (of which, more later). The boss may be under an illusion that staff are open with him because they point to an occasional decision with which they do not agree. Alas, such criticisms do not mean that they trust him. In fact, the absence of trust in the boss is the commonest of all feelings among staff – together with a feeling that he does not trust them.

With trust goes loyalty to – and from – staff. I recall one boss saying to me that he could see how much change was needed, but that he could do very little with the staff he had. He had been boss for over 15 years; most of the staff had been appointed or promoted while he was there. To blame his staff for the library's serious inadequacies was outrageous;

but apart from that, with such an attitude towards his staff he could hardly expect them to be loyal to him (in fact, they were far more loyal to him than he had any right to expect).

Even the best bosses fail to realize how they often dominate without intending to. I have sat in on meetings where the boss opens a discussion by giving his own views, and then wonders why there is so little response. It is usually something he has been thinking about for a few days anyway. Staff present either cannot think quickly enough – they have had no advance notice – or they do not wish to contradict the boss. If he is doing their thinking for them, why should they bother? Neither he nor they realize what is happening, and their unawareness makes it all the more difficult to change it. (This is something which I freely admit to having done myself as a boss – I had no idea I was doing it until a consultant told me, in front of my senior management.)

Most bosses think that they delegate. What they do not realize is that what they delegate is usually work, not responsibility. The difference is fundamental.

What staff want of a boss is a sense of direction, not a list of directives. What they usually get is the latter.

Types of boss

Top bosses can be typified in various ways. The following list is not just frivolity: caricatures can be very revealing, just because they highlight readily recognizable characteristics.
- Tarzan – the exhibitionist;
- Jehovah – the almighty, never to be seen face-to-face, to be petitioned with reverence, and to be worshipped even when clearly wrong;
- Victorian father – who believes in "spare the rod and spoil the child";
- Bull – clumsy and unpredictable (but often at peace in a field of cows);
- Mickey Mouse – not to be taken seriously;
- Ostrich – avoids all decision;
- Dumbo – knows less than most of the staff, but does not recognize it;
- Snail – slow to act, and leaves a trail of slime behind;
- Einstein – the great intellect, who solves theoretical problems in his ivory tower;
- Baudelaire – the artistic and creative mind, who is above everyday matters (or even morals);

- Elder statesman – authoritative, senior, remote;
- Mother hen – constantly fussing over the chicks;
- Nosey parker – always looking over the shoulders of staff, not content unless knowing what everyone is doing and how they are doing it;
- Weather vane – shifts with every wind;
- Sloth – lazy, but survives by hanging on to branches with his toes;
- Lone Ranger – operates entirely on his own;
- Paranoid – everyone is out to get him;
- Obsessional housewife – wants everything neat and tidy and pigeon-holed;
- Teddy bear – friendly, cannot bear not to be liked;
- Hermit crab – shuts himself away from sight and sound;
- Machiavelli – clever but devious and not wholly principled;
- Little boy lost – feels alone in a strange and frightening world;
- One of the lads – wants to be accepted as a mate by all the staff;
- Malevolent dictator (Stalin?);
- Enlightened despot (Emperor Joseph II?);
- Kind father – considerate, but definitely dad;
- Richard the Lionheart – charismatic leader, but liable to end up in trouble;
- Mandarin – the administrator *par excellence,* always the height of diplomacy.

The list could be extended almost *ad infinitum.* Few of the above are really nasty creatures; but many of them can do almost as much damage as if they were. Some bosses combine types; for example, I have known a Mother hen *cum* Weather vane and a Paranoid Baudelaire.

A similar list could be compiled of common faults:
- ignorance;
- interference;
- isolation;
- incoherence;
- intellectualism;
- inconsistency;
- inhumanity.

Intellectualism is not an uncommon fault. The cerebral boss takes more pride in his brain than in his management of people. He may even dazzle the parent body with it from time to time. But not only does it not take a

great brain to be a good boss; it can be a positive handicap, as it can make the boss seem superior, remote and unapproachable. Formidable intellects (of which there are, admittedly, not very many in librarianship) tend to make forbidding bosses. Worse still are those who are alone in thinking that they have a formidable intellect, or who put on a pretence of one.

Even the best bosses go stale, as they spend more and more time in one place – and also as they grow older; very rarely do they improve with age. Age tends to make bosses either more dominating and intolerant or more defensive, less responsive to ideas and criticism, and possibly resentful of the drive, ambition and abilities they are conscious of in staff at lower levels. There is virtually nothing that can be done about this: if the boss will not delegate in such a way that he can still use his accumulated knowledge and experience without the stress of day-to-day management, he should be retired.

How the top boss behaves sets the pattern for how other managers behave. Critical as they often are of him, they usually act in similar ways themselves. This is one main reason why the top boss is so important. I like to start a consultancy by talking to staff at the lowest level and then work upwards. When I first did this, I was shattered by the apparent lack of concern for these staff shown by their bosses at all levels. As the top boss treats his staff, so they tend to treat theirs. Great resources of energy, enthusiasm and ability in staff, especially at lower levels, are suppressed or, at best, underused. Their questions and suggestions are dismissed, and they are rarely given any interesting, demanding or responsible work.

What should a boss be like?

It is not too hard to discover what a boss ought to be like. I have asked librarians who attended some of my seminars to construct lists of qualities that are necessary or desirable in a boss, and the lists show a remarkable consistency. The list below is typical:
- personal sense of security;
- commitment;
- integrity;
- imagination and foresight;
- analytical mind;
- ability to cut through complex issues;
- energy;

- toughness;
- loyalty – to the institution, to the library and to the staff;
- political sense;
- sensitivity – to the environment, to users and to staff;
- caring and concern for customers and staff;
- ability to handle stress;
- intelligence;
- decisiveness;
- clear sense of direction;
- humility – ability to listen;
- flexibility;
- approachability and accessibility;
- fairness;
- warmth, combined with ability to be objective;
- sense of humour;
- ability to communicate;
- enthusiasm;
- persistence;
- openness;
- ability and will to make things happen.

I doubt if bosses themselves would produce a very different list; but the marks they would give themselves would probably differ substantially from those awarded them by their staff.

It is worth noting that staff do not want a weak or soft boss. They know that firmness in dealing with them is sometimes needed. Contrary to what some bosses seem to think, there is no inconsistency whatever between being firm and being humble. Participative management is not at all a soft option; indeed, it is harder than autocratic management, but usually far more effective.

What can be done?

What can be done about an inadequate boss? Unless the boss co-operates, frankly very little. If the boss recognizes the need for him to change his style, there is a chance of improvement – though even then he rarely realizes how much he has to change. But mostly there is no such recognition. Books have been written on managing the boss, but they are about as useful as instructions for belling the cat, or at best lion taming (which results in a lion that is docile only in certain very limited conditions – and even then he may turn and devour his trainer); mostly they contain devious ways of, for example, getting the boss to think that your idea is his.

If a boss is to change, he has to have some degree of humility – which is unlikely unless he is also very secure. Secure people will listen and take advice; they feel no loss of dignity if they mix with staff at any level; they accept that some of their staff are better than they are at various things or in various ways, and do not mind – and so they are able to tap the abilities of everyone without any resentment or jealousy. But if a boss is like this, there is little or no problem to be solved. What cannot be done, except perhaps in some exceptional cases and over a long period of time, is to make a secure person out of an insecure one.

Even bosses who recognize, however vaguely, some need to change find it hard to know not only how to change but in what direction. Unless they are new, they are as much prisoners of the institutional mindset as are the rest of the staff. It is hard for anyone who has worked in an organization for more than a year or two to change their behaviour, not least because by that time a body of expectations will have been established, and this is very difficult to break.

One way of breaking this pattern is deliberately to involve staff more, asking them what they think, etc. – and waiting until they have spoken. This will feel strange at first; the boss will find it hard to stand back and let staff speak first, and usually it will not be easy to get them to do so. I said above that it is almost impossible for a boss to know what staff think of him. It is useless to ask them directly, not least because it looks very self-conscious and as if the boss is looking for reassurance if not compliments. But as staff come to speak more freely and trust develops, their attitudes will gradually become clearer.

Another way for bosses to find out more about how they are viewed is to use the assessment process (assuming there is one) as a two-way exercise, with the boss asking his senior staff individually how they assess his performance. It takes a good deal of trust for them to take him at his word when he asks them, and a lot of self-confidence for him to ask. A better alternative is to use a formal upward appraisal system of the kind that is being used more in the private sector; but if this is to work well it still requires trust.

I mentioned the absence of trust as the commonest criticism of all. This underlies much else. It is, fortunately, one of the things that is easiest to put right, in principle at least; for if the boss trusts staff they will tend to trust

him. Involving staff is one way of showing trust. Letting go and delegating more is another and related way. It has to be genuine trust, however, not going through the motions of trusting behaviour; staff will immediately see through that. So we are back once again to the boss who feels secure enough to trust.

A consultant may be called in, perhaps ostensibly to help to change other staff. If staff do not tell consultants directly what they think of the boss (and they often will, even if they understate their views), they will certainly convey it to them in other ways. Generally I have found that staff understand the boss's problems better than he thinks they do, and they are frequently anxious to help him. There is often a fair amount of frustration with the boss, but only very rarely real hatred. The consultant can then tell the boss things that no member of staff possibly could, even if staff themselves realize what is wrong. Unfortunately, the bosses who most need help are nearly always the most reluctant to bring in a consultant. (I am sure that Robert Maxwell never asked a consultant for advice on his management style, and I dread to think what would have happened if he had.)

Telling the boss has to be done carefully as bosses are sensitive creatures, however much they may try to cover this with a veneer of toughness. Even if they do recognize that there may be something wrong, they are generally surprised to learn what it is ("it" is usually several things), and often refuse to believe it at first – or sometimes ever. Even the most agreeable and self-confident bosses will not like much of what they hear, and will initially resist it; but they will usually come round – unless the consultant has been imposed on the library by the parent body, in which case total and continuing resistance can be expected. Disagreeable and insecure bosses will reject it outright.

Perfection in a boss is neither attainable nor desirable; if any boss possessed all the qualities identified as desirable, he would not be an ideal boss, since staff would be in such awe of this paragon that they would feel an obligation to be equally perfect. But improvement *is* attainable, so long as the boss:
- accepts that he has deficiencies;
- listens as well as talks;
- lets go and delegates more;
- uses his staff as colleagues and advisers, not mere employees;
- shows personal interest in his staff.

It helps if he carries out a personal SWOT analysis, looking honestly at his strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats; if he is brave enough, he can check its accuracy with a few of his senior managers.

Sometimes the only cure for the boss is removal. However sympathetic one may be towards the boss, when the alternative to his departure is a frustrated and unproductive staff and a poorer outlook for the library, the choice should be easy. He need not be totally removed; there are often posts, such as senior research fellowships, which can be created for him. The extra cost is more than recouped by increased productivity on the part of the staff. Alas, parent bodies often seem to find it hard to take firm action when a boss is doing much damage and has proved incurable.

None of these suggestions answers the question staff often ask – what can *they* do about their bosses? – as they all require the initiative to come from the boss himself or from the parent body. Staff can try to make things uncomfortable for an inadequate boss, but they always have to remember that he is able to make things far more uncomfortable for them, and that he has much more power to drive them to resignation than they have to drive him. There is, however, no reason why they should put up with unacceptable behaviour; while they may tolerate a good deal (often because they do not recognize what they are tolerating), there have to be limits.

For staff to convey their discomfort to the parent body is difficult and unpleasant.

Trying to get over messages direct to the boss, possibly by means of a delegation, is liable to result in frustration, though opportunities to do so should not be lost. In any case, it is self-destructive for staff to spend their time and energy in lamentation. What staff can and must do is to observe inadequacies so that *they* can avoid them themselves in *their* dealings with staff under them, both now and later when they are, perhaps, in positions of greater responsibility. A lot can be learned from a bad boss (as I know from personal experience), so long as staff are aware of what is going wrong; passive acceptance by staff is liable to result in their subconscious modelling of their behaviour on his.

Better times ahead?

This paper may seem pessimistic. There are, however, signs of hope. The power that bosses have is being eroded by the process of "empowerment" (a word that many dislike, but which is actually very useful – after all, it came into being because there was no other word that expressed its meaning), largely as a result of information technology, which increasingly makes decisions at lower levels necessary. New attitudes to leadership are becoming more widespread, and more people who become bosses have been through some kind of management training. Most important of all, there are more and more models of good bosses to serve as examples to staff and bosses alike. Improvement can therefore be expected, but it will not be speedy.