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Grooming the boss

Can we learn to improve the way we do our jobs from books? Publishers must think so since they churn out hundreds every year. Four of these "how to" books arrived on my desk in the same week, all dealing with the role of the boss. Perhaps their appearance was astrologically inspired, like the rare alignment of the planets you can see in the night sky just now across the northern hemisphere.

Two of the books were about leadership and two were about bosses. Is there a difference? As far as I can see leadership is the preferred term of consultants. You can sell leadership, but it is more difficult to sell the concept of the boss. I do not plan to dwell here on the leadership books. One of them pictures an executive on the cover, leaping about like Michael Flatley in Riverdance.

The two books on bosses had the most serendipitous relationship since one, *How to Become a Great Boss**, was advising us how to boss and the other, *How to Manage Your Boss***, was showing us how to be bossed. In theory, read together, they should provide distinct perspectives of what is needed to ensure a harmonious arrangement.

The first one has to be the most attractive to bosses since, unlike the second, it does not assume that they too have bosses. Two other attractions, particularly for bosses, are that it is short and simple in the extreme. Point one in its "simple success formula" says: "Only hire top-notch, excellent people." Point two says: "Put the right people in the right job" and point three says: "Tell the people what needs to be done."

It looks like the job has been sorted before the end of page four. The second book digs a little deeper, asking one of the trickier questions about bosses: what do they actually do? It does not mention anything about hiring top-notch people but it does remind you as a subordinate that bosses have much greater responsibilities than your own, pointing out that "you may be a much smaller part of their working life than they are of yours".

The lesson here is that the boss is far more important than you are and don't you forget it, even if you are top-notch thanks to your boss's recruiting skills. If you are not top-notch then you have a problem since the book your boss is reading is advising him to "groom 'em or broom 'em". But you cannot know this because you are still reading the chapter that advises you to gauge your boss's personality, strengths and weaknesses so that your own skills and style can "mesh snugly" with those of the boss.

The Great Boss has moved on a few chapters and he or she is soon wielding the broom. One of the first things done after taking over was to get rid of the personnel files made up of years of written employee appraisals. The human resources director "went berserk", of course, but that didn't worry this boss.

This boss knows what to do in every situation. When the ageing vice-president of sales wants to work forever, the boss takes him to one side and tells stories about veteran baseball stars like Micky Mantle (who would have damaged his batting average had he stayed on) and Babe Ruth who fell down while swinging his bat towards the end of his career. This way the sales executive goes quietly.

Does this mean we should run and hide if our boss begins to chum up to us and start talking about sport? The second book doesn't say. Neither does it warn us about "D" words. The first book has a chapter advising the Great Boss to look out for "D" words. "When a star's lustre dulls look for a D," it says. The D's range from divorce, debt, disease and drugs to depression, drinking and "deviancy". It doesn't define this last one. The inclusion of "dice" and "dalliance" suggests the dictionary was running out of employee vices. Another one, "death" should be easy to spot. "Obviously not all people problems start with a D, but many do," it says.

The Great Boss is not going to be messed around by anyone. When she strikes a deal with an employee at the recruitment stage she expects it to be honoured. If a star employee comes in to demand a rise because others have been engaged on higher salaries, the Great Boss can quote the New Testament story about the labourers in the vineyard. In this story, from the book of Matthew, one group of labourers is hired in the morning at the same rate given to a second group who do just half a day's work. The owner reminds those who complain that a deal is a deal and he is entitled to pay what he wishes.

But the Great Boss has slipped up this time because his employee has been reading about assertiveness in her own book. This book says we must learn to stand our ground, be honest, express our feelings and be able to say "no" while respecting our boss. The Great Boss isn't advised what to do when the employee says: "Forget the New Testament, this is a crummy deal." He can hardly reach for the broom when this is one of his top-notch recruits.

The answer is in the very next chapter which reminds him that he should delegate everything. So the embarrassing vineyard scene need never happen. Bosses, it reminds us, need to demonstrate "uncommon wisdom". One trick, when asked for a decision by a subordinate is to throw the question back, saying: "I don't know. What do you think?"

This might not wash with the bookish employee. Armed with his own advice book, he could sidestep the question and ask the boss for feedback. This is where we reach an impasse since the two books are united in advising bosses and employees to develop their listening skills. The impasse will not be without its moments because the employee has been advised to "listen actively". So while the boss is simply listening, the employee is making eye contact, issuing encouraging noises such as "mmm", smiling and nodding.

Perhaps at this stage it is time to put your books on the table. All of them, including the leadership stuff. Then broom 'em.

** How To Become A Great Boss, by Jeffrey J. Fox, published by Hyperion, Dollars 16.95. ** How to Manage Your Boss, developing the perfect working relationship, by Ros Jay, is published by Prentice Hall Business, price Pounds 12.99.*

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