

You're Not the Boss of Me



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I grew up with three younger siblings. Frequently, because both of my parents worked, I was put in charge of my brother and sisters. It was during these times when, invariably, one of them would exclaim, “You’re not the boss of me!” To a certain extent, they were correct, though it seldom diminished my zeal for exerting my influence over them. After all, Mom and Dad put me in charge!

When I entered the world of work as a young man, the concept of “boss” was pervasive in the business realm. Top-down hierarchies were the norm. You learned very early in your work tenure where you fell on the food chain. I was “put in my place” on more than one occasion as a young employee. In time, I learned to be mindful of my place and to be careful not to do anything that would upset...the boss.



The concept of authority has evolved over time. Corporate America seldom refers to the “boss” of an organisation; that term is nearly taboo in the 21st century. Instead, a host of other titles have replaced the term “boss,” the most prevalent being “leader.” While I support the change in vocabulary, I wonder how many “leaders” are actually behaving in a different manner than a “boss.” There are stark differences between the two. I highlight five distinctions below.

1. Bosses Dictate; Leaders Involve.

Bosses are notorious for telling others what to do. They believe that they alone have all of the answers. They dictate orders and instructions, directing people to do their bidding. Questioning a directive is perceived by bosses as insubordination. Leaders, however, involve others in problem solving and troubleshooting. They recognise that no single person can possibly have all the answers. Quite the contrary. Leaders understand that decisions are stronger when many heads get around the table. Leaders trust those with whom they work, and they demonstrate that trust by frequently engaging them in meaningful dialogue.

2. Bosses Control; Leaders Empower.

Bosses relish the organisational flowchart. Their sense of self is wrapped up in where they fall in the hierarchy. They delight in exercising power over others. Top-down decision making is the norm. Bosses can be oppressive, controlling, and domineering. Leaders, on the other hand, empower their employees to take ownership in the organisation’s mission and vision. They inspire, motivate, and encourage employees to take risks and be creative. Leaders work in a collegial, not dictatorial, fashion with those whom they supervise.

3. Bosses Hide; Leaders Seek.

Bosses have a strong aversion to failure. They fear being blamed, fear being vulnerable, and fear taking risks. As such, it is not uncommon for them to stay on the sidelines and not engage in the real work of the organisation. They hide in their offices, appear to be busy with important matters, and make cursory appearances among the rank and file. Leaders, conversely, roll up their sleeves and immerse themselves in the dirty work. They are not afraid to be transparent with their employees, oftentimes learning new strategies alongside those they supervise. Leaders are risk takers and hard workers, seekers of solutions to problems that plague the organisation. Leaders admit when they make a mistake.

4. Bosses Lecture; Leaders Teach.

The central concern of a boss is self. Bosses are selfish and ego-centred. How they believe they are perceived by others is of importance to them. As such, they lecture others in an attempt to edify themselves. Lectures may come in the form of criticism, reprimands, chastisements, or boasting. Leaders speak to their staff in a far different fashion. Because they are selfless and self-effacing, they find joy in the success of others. Building confidence in others is important to leaders. As such, their verbal interchanges with others come in the form of teaching, praising, encouraging, and challenging.

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5. Bosses Judge; Leaders Support.

Bosses hold people accountable through evaluation. They judge people without putting support systems in place. They concern themselves with results, not people. When results are positive, bosses take credit; when results are less than adequate, they accuse others. Leaders also believe in accountability; however, they understand that apart from support, success is not possible. Because of this, leaders are servant-minded individuals. They invest time, energy, and resources in people to ensure success.



“You’re not the boss of me!” If you ever hear this from one of your staff, rejoice! What a compliment that is! Be encouraged if your staff does not see you as a boss but as a leader. A boss secures from his subordinates short term compliance, superficial conformity, and minimal (if any) respect. A leader, on the other hand, builds a team that welcomes change, supports the organisation’s vision, and embraces district initiatives.

The leadership style defined herein—involving, empowering, seeking, teaching, supporting—will undoubtedly require different behaviours than bosses of old. Quite frankly, it is impossible to be an instructional leader using only managerial methods. Lead your staff—don’t boss them—and you will gain their respect, admiration, and appreciation.