

WHAT YOUR
BOSS
REALLY WANTS
FROM YOU

15 Insights to Improve
Your Relationship

STEVE ARNESON

Author of the bestselling *Bootstrap Leadership*

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Also by Steve Arneson

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STEVE ARNESON



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What Your Boss Really Wants from You

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*To all of my best bosses –
Thank you for your integrity and honesty*

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INTRODUCTION



As an executive coach, I've worked with hundreds of people in all types of organizations, guiding them through a professional development journey. It's a fascinating process, one that has the potential to change their work lives. Each person has their own story, of course—a unique narrative that includes their skills, experience, strengths, weaknesses, and relationships. Yet while every engagement is different, these people all have one thing in common: their boss always plays a central role in the story. That's why my first coaching question is, *What does your boss really want from you?* This is where the reflective process starts because determining what the boss wants is essential to success in any job.

Now, some of my clients have great bosses, so we discuss the relationship briefly and move on to their development opportunities. Great bosses have a lot of wonderful qualities, including a clear picture of what they want from you. They expect you to: 1) have a strong work ethic, 2) demonstrate a positive attitude, 3) be a team player, 4) generate innovative ideas, and 5) get outstanding results. The best bosses clearly express their expectations in these and other areas. They also want what's best for you; they want to see you grow, develop, and succeed.

However, many of my clients don't work for a great boss. They don't understand what he really wants. They're not clear about his expectations. They don't know what he thinks of them, and all this uncertainty impacts their engagement, performance,

and happiness. In these cases, we spend as much time talking about the boss as we do discussing their specific improvement opportunities. In fact, for some of my clients, the “boss issue” is the only conversation that really matters.

Hidden Motives

Let me be clear: it's not that these people lack agreed upon objectives. In every case, there are formal performance goals that have been agreed to by the boss. I'm talking about the unknown expectations, those hidden motives that may drive his behavior and the real reasons behind his agenda. Let's face it, some bosses have ulterior motives, and they're certainly not going to share them with you. Do you really know why he approves one project but rejects another? Why he lets you interact with some senior leaders but not others? Why he never lets you make a presentation to his manager? Your boss may have motives that have nothing to do with helping you achieve your goals. Not every boss is like this, of course. Many are perfectly transparent and have clear intentions. But some have motives that don't align with your best interests, and that can cause a lot of sleepless nights.

A Necessary Relationship

There's a good reason for this anxiety, of course. Your boss is the most important person in your work life. He has the power to hire and fire, to empower or micro-manage. He determines (to a large extent) how you'll be recognized and rewarded. He controls whether you get promoted, and how you're thought of by senior management. Now, in a perfect world, all bosses

would be skilled managers; all would have pure motives that help you grow, develop, and deliver great results. But the fact is, not all managers are wired this way. That is why you need to know what motivates him. If you don't understand why your boss does what he does, or what he really wants from you, you'll likely be worried, frustrated, and disengaged; you certainly won't be delivering your best work.

The Unexpected Solution

I wish there were an easy solution to this problem. Let's go back to my clients who are struggling with their bosses. The first thing they want to know is, *How do I change my boss?* Know what I tell them? Forget about changing him. That's right, the hard truth is that all of your efforts to improve, fix, or convert your boss won't work. The secret is changing your own approach to interacting with your boss. The "fix" is adapting your own style to make the relationship work. The transformation has to be one you undergo in your awareness, attitude, and behaviors. This isn't always easy, but it's the only path that will get you to a better place with your boss.

What you can't do is continue to play the victim. I've seen a lot of people fall into "victim mode" when it comes to the boss; everything is the boss's fault. These people create a story about the boss that fits their view of the world, and that story generally doesn't reflect reality. Are you doing this? Are you living in a story that doesn't allow you to improve the relationship? If so, my goal is to help you see your boss more objectively, to help you change your story, demonstrate new behaviors, and take charge of the relationship.

How to Use This Book

This is a book about insight. Specifically, it's about turning insight into self-awareness and behavior change. The process described here helps you better understand where your boss is coming from, and provides a roadmap for adjusting your own attitude and behavior to fit his true motives. The book is divided into three sections, and begins by asking you to *Study Your Boss*. The first step in working more effectively with your boss is gaining an understanding of what drives his behavior—developing a clear picture of his work style, leadership brand, and motives. Next, you must *Consider How Your Boss Sees You*. Here you need to draw an accurate picture of how you're perceived by the boss. Studying your boss is important, but you also have to look at yourself from his perspective. Finally, you have to *Take Responsibility for the Relationship*. This is the real key to improving your work life: being accountable for the boss relationship. The first two sections are about gaining awareness; this section is about turning those insights into action. Here you'll find practical suggestions for changing your story, tips for interacting more effectively with your boss, and advice for getting the relationship back on track. In each section, I share examples from my own work experience as well as stories from my coaching practice. All of these examples are real and are meant to illustrate scenarios you may be experiencing right now. Whether you work in a small company (where the boss may be the founder) or a large corporate, government, or educational institution, I think these examples will resonate with you.

Finally, two notes about the purpose and structure of the book: First, while this process is designed for you, I believe bosses can gain valuable insight from the questions as well. The attitude

and behavior adjustments don't have to be one-sided. So if you're also a boss, use this book to bring more transparency into your motives and actions; your team will appreciate the effort. Second, most of us have worked for male and female managers. For simplicity, I refer to the boss as a male in Section 1, a female in Section 2, and use both genders in Section 3. However, all of the questions and suggestions in the book apply equally to male and female managers.

Look, I hope you work for a great boss. But even if you do, there may be things about him you don't understand; this process gives you the insight to create an even stronger working partnership. However, if you are struggling with your boss, it might be because you haven't cracked the code of what really motivates him. You haven't figured out what he *really* wants and, therefore, what he wants from you. Most importantly, you haven't made the commitment to change your own attitude and behavior to better align with his style. If that's the case, I believe this book can help you. I hope you'll find this process useful in creating a more meaningful, productive, and enjoyable work experience.

Steve Arneson
Boulder, Colorado

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STEP 1



Study Your Boss

Your boss is the central character in your work life. No matter how long you've been working, I bet you can name every boss you ever had—that's how powerful their imprint is on us. We remember our bosses because they have a significant impact on our overall work experience. I've long forgotten most of the details of my first part-time job (which was decades ago) but I'll never forget Mr. Peterson, my first boss. Mr. Peterson was a taskmaster, but he was fair and supportive if you were willing to work hard. I learned a lot from him, most of which went beyond how to do the job. He taught me the meaning of work ethic, commitment, and accountability.

I imagine you have lots of boss stories, too. I bet you could also tell me how each boss made you feel—whether you enjoyed working for them or couldn't wait to get away from them. Whether you loved coming to work or dreaded Monday mornings. Bosses are like that, it seems; we either love them or hate them.

How many bosses will you have in your career? Given that the average U.S. job tenure is 4.1 years (according to the *Bureau of Labor Statistics*) you're probably going to have at least 15–20 different bosses before you retire. What are the odds that every

one of them is going to be a great manager? How many will have your best interests in mind? How many will be focused on your growth and development? How many will be comfortable with you being the star? The fact is you're almost certain to work for both good and bad bosses in your career ... and how you adapt to these different bosses will have everything to do with your job satisfaction.

Best Boss/Worst Boss

One of the exercises I do with corporate leadership audiences involves having them share their “best” and “worst” boss stories. The room is buzzing with energy when they talk about their favorite manager; everyone has a story about their best boss helping to advance their careers. However, the room gets a lot quieter when they tell the worst boss story. In fact, some people would rather not be reminded of this person at all. But here's what's fascinating about this exercise... nearly everyone has a story to share about a good *and* bad boss; they've all had both experiences.

The “best boss” story has many common themes—good direction, empowerment, feedback, recognition, a mentoring relationship, and plenty of opportunities to grow and develop. Above all, there is clear line of sight to everything the boss is about; you get where they're coming from, and know why they do the things they do. Everything is transparent, logical, and understood; simply put, there's always a solid relationship at the heart of the best boss story. They care about you as an individual, too.

The “worst boss” story is a completely different tale. These stories are filled with poor delegation, lack of empowerment, no recognition or feedback, no coaching or mentoring, and

oftentimes, even underhanded behavior. To make matters worse, the worst bosses are hard to read; you never truly know why they do what they do. In fact, when you work for one of these bosses, you feel confused and frustrated a lot of the time; there just isn't a strong relationship, or even the possibility of building one. Bad bosses tend not to care about you as a person.

Why do some bosses care about you while others don't? Why are some bosses open and transparent, while others are closed off or malicious? Why are some bosses confident and egoless, while others are insecure? I think it has everything to do with their personal motives. Everything your boss does (or doesn't do) can be traced back to his beliefs or values—which produce a distinct set of motives. You want to have a better relationship with your boss? It starts with understanding what really drives his behavior.

Understanding Your Boss's Motives

To paraphrase Leo Tolstoy's quote about families, all good bosses resemble each other, but each bad boss is different in their own way. Therein lies the essence of this book—if you're struggling to get along with your boss, you have to figure out his unique motivations. You see, I believe that every behavior can be traced back to a specific motive—that even bad bosses do things for a reason. The problem is the bad boss's motives are often misguided or self-serving. If he doesn't let you meet with his boss, for example, there's a reason for that ... and in order to truly understand why, you have to understand his motives.

There is no doubt that our personal motives drive our actions. Some of us are motivated by money, others crave recognition. Some of us just want to do good work; others want

to get ahead at all costs. Some of us want to be liked by everyone and others couldn't care less about making friends at work. Some of us are afraid of making a mistake; others are more comfortable with risk. We're all motivated by something ... and that includes your boss.

I wish I could tell you exactly what your boss wants from you. But I'm not in the relationship—you are. So you have to do the work ... you have to study his behaviors to truly understand his motives. The key to working comfortably with your boss is figuring out what drives his thoughts and actions.

Study Your Boss

If your boss is a mystery to you, you need insight. Insight is the understanding of the motivational forces behind one's actions, thoughts, or behavior. This definition perfectly describes what I'm trying to help people achieve through coaching—a clear picture of what is driving their boss's behavior. We do this through a process I call “studying your boss.”

I have found that people who struggle with their boss generally haven't done their homework; they haven't rigorously studied their manager's behavior to uncover core motives. They feel the result of the boss's behavior, but don't understand what is causing it. They're frustrated by their interactions with the boss, but they don't know what to do about it. When I work with people who fit this description, I ask them a series of questions to help them gain the insight needed to adjust the relationship with their boss.

This process of studying your boss involves ten questions. Each question is designed to offer awareness into the boss's

behaviors or mindset. The answers may come from asking the boss directly, talking with peers, or just paying closer attention to your immediate environment. However gained, the insights will give you a much clearer picture of the underlying motives that drive your boss's actions. At this stage, I just want you to thoughtfully consider and answer these questions as best you can. Try the writing exercises, and reflect on what you've learned. Later, in section three, I'll provide suggestions for adapting to various motives. Here are the questions:

Study Your Boss

Management Style

1. When and how is he most approachable?
2. What is his preferred management style?
3. What behaviors does he reward?

Mission & Priorities

4. What is he trying to accomplish in this role?
5. What is he worried about?

Leadership Brand

6. What is his reputation in the company?

Relationships

7. Whom does he respect?
8. Where does he have influence?
9. What is his relationship like with his boss?

Primary Motivation

10. What is his primary motivation?

As we take a look at each of the questions in depth, write down your thoughts or observations to each question and dig deep for signs or signals that you haven't noticed before. Ask trusted peers for their opinions, and pay attention to your boss's moods, body language, words, and actions. By carefully considering each question, you will develop a series of insights that will help explain his behavior.

1 When and how is he most approachable?

This seems like a simple question, doesn't it? Yet there is a great deal of insight to be gained by studying when and how to approach your boss. Like all managers, he has a particular style of interacting with his team. Some bosses are informal; you can talk to them anytime, anywhere. Others are more rigid and process oriented. The key is to figure out his preferred interaction style. For instance, can you knock on the door and get a minute of his time? Has he declared his preference about the office pop-in? If not, ask him directly: *Are you open to me coming by your office with a quick question, and if so, when is the best time during the day?* If that doesn't work, ask one of your peers or just pay attention to the pattern of when you've been most successful. I once worked for a boss who literally wouldn't allow the "do you have a minute" request—you had to set up an appointment to ask a simple question. Believe me, I wasted a lot of time and energy before I figured this out, and was getting worried that he didn't like me. But it really had nothing to do with me. It turned out he preferred to read and prepare for any discussion and didn't feel equipped to make decisions in informal conversations (this single insight explained a lot about this boss, by the way).

In today's world, understanding his approachability means knowing when to call, text, or instant message, too. The same principles apply—when is he most approachable, and what are his preferences? Some bosses prefer e-mail over phone calls; others want to talk directly if possible. Some bosses text; others won't. Some bosses are accessible when they are out of the office and others aren't. You get the idea. It's about knowing when and how. But it's also about knowing why.

Understanding why is what helps you make sense of his

behavior. I recently coached Tanya, who was experiencing a huge disconnect with her boss. She kept trying to call him directly, and the boss always refused to take her call; the boss's assistant would just say, "Send him an e-mail." And of course, whenever Tanya did that, she received a prompt, thoughtful reply. Strange, I know. Wouldn't it be quicker to just talk on the phone? Of course, the boss never explained his motive, which drove Tanya crazy; she was convinced the boss thought she was a poor performer. Now, as it happens, in my feedback process, I learned the boss wanted a written record of every interaction. He didn't like the phone for even the shortest conversations because it didn't allow for a trail of detail or evidence. Was the boss anti-social? Almost certainly. But the real motive behind his interaction style had nothing to do with that; rather, it was based in a more practical (some would say paranoid) reason. This is a perfect example of the value of digging deep to gain an understanding of the core motives behind your boss's behavior. The "why" isn't always what it seems to be, and much of the time, it isn't about you at all.

The second thing you need to study is his mood pattern. What puts him in a good mood, or conversely, a bad frame of mind? What day of the week is he most approachable? When should you leave him alone? Is he stressed right before a meeting with his boss? Do certain events or deadlines impact his approachability? Try this exercise: For a month, make a daily diary of his moods. Name the mood (angry, happy, sad, etc.) and note how approachable he was each day. Then, study the diary to learn your boss's patterns and work around them to your advantage.

Third, how much can you challenge your boss in group settings? What style of interaction works best? Is he open to rigorous debate? Most managers hold staff meetings with their

direct reports, and there are unwritten rules about challenging the boss's ideas, how long to debate an issue in front of the team, etc. Do you know where this line is with your boss? Have you ever crossed it?

A lot of bosses are resistant to anyone disagreeing with them in public, and it can take a while to learn that. One of my clients, Craig, was getting frustrated with his boss's staff meetings because no one would challenge the boss's ideas. As Craig tried repeatedly to push back on his boss (with respect), he made things worse for himself because the boss didn't tolerate or appreciate this interaction style. Craig learned to discuss these issues outside of the meeting format, but it took some reflection about the boss's motives to recognize and make this shift in his approach. The trick is to pay attention to the small signs if you find yourself in a non-productive public conversation with your boss. How is he reacting to you? Study his body language and tone of voice. If you're pushing his buttons, find a gracious exit to the discussion.

Finally, you have to know what subjects are either allowed or out-of-bounds for your boss. What are the topics or questions you can raise, and what are the sacred cows? Where can you probe, and what should you leave alone? There are some issues you shouldn't approach him about; and if you do, he won't talk about them anyway. For years, I tried to get a boss to talk about his life outside of work. He wouldn't do it. I'm an open person, so I thought that was odd—why wouldn't he share what he did on the weekend? It was really bugging me. He would talk about sports and current events, but not about his hobbies or family. Finally, I realized I wasn't going to break through that wall between work and home, and stopped asking him. I accepted that I wasn't going to change him. If he wanted to keep certain

things private, that was his choice; he didn't have to be just like me. And you know what? Once I stopped worrying about it, our relationship improved.

The bottom line is that you need to be thoughtful about approaching your boss. He wants you to fit his interaction practices, not create new ones. Every time you push him out of his comfort zone, you risk annoying him. How many minor irritations are you willing to add to your ledger? The easier path is to adapt to his style by learning exactly when and how he is most approachable. Then, work out the rationale for his preferences so you understand where he's coming from; there might be an underlying (albeit quirky) reason that has nothing to do with you. You may not like it, but at least you'll understand it.



INSIGHTS

Approachability

- *Recognize when and how he is most approachable.*
- *Determine how to interact with him in a group setting.*
- *Know what he will and won't discuss with you.*

Combine all of this knowledge to choose the best interaction plan.

② What is his preferred management style?

Every boss has their own cadence and rhythm when it comes to getting work done; your job is to figure out what it is, and adapt to it. For example, does your boss like detailed work plans? Does he seek a lot of input before making a decision? Does he like to be hands-on when developing the presentation that goes to his peers and boss? Does he like to work one-on-one with you on a task, or does he pull in members of your team? In short, what's the predictable pattern from start to finish on projects? How does he manage the day-to-day work that goes on in your department?

In my experience, bosses will have a preferred style for at least three basic work tasks. First, they will follow a set process for generating ideas. Some bosses prefer brainstorming; others want to generate their own list of ideas and have you react. Some bosses don't engage much in this phase; they merely want to hear the ideas and then approve a final course of action. Do you know how your boss likes to generate and approve ideas, and why? Make a list of your recent ideas and how your boss reacted to each one. This insight will tell you a lot about him—how much does he want to be involved in this first step of the process?

Most likely, he wants to be involved in solving just certain problems, but couldn't care less about others. This is the proverbial "deep dive" question: how deep into the process will he get, and why? This is one of the most common complaints I hear from clients; they don't know why their boss "goes deep" on one topic, but not another. Oftentimes, there doesn't seem to be a set pattern. It's hard to predict which topic will cause him to get highly engaged. I can assure you it's not random; there's a reason that some issues get his full attention and others don't. More

often than not, it has to do with ego or reputation. Your boss's deep dives are generally motivated by a feeling that his solution is clearly the best option, or by not wanting to appear out of touch with the details of important projects.

The second management process to study is his preference for building a presentation. If an idea, proposal, or recommendation needs to be packaged into a story, he is going to have an established method for overseeing this process. Do you recognize all the phases of this work flow? Can you articulate them step-by-step? My guess is that your boss likes to build the business case in a predictable fashion. Your job is to pay attention to his preferences so you can get through the process as efficiently as possible.

Mary is struggling with this right now. She's frustrated by her boss's iterative process for creating a presentation. They go through multiple drafts before arriving at the final version. These iterations change only slightly from one draft to the next, and the boss is heavily involved in reviewing every draft. Mary would like to create a final version without all the review meetings with her boss. When I asked her why the boss preferred to work this way, she answered: "Because he doesn't trust me to develop the story on my own." I encouraged Mary to check this impression with her peers, and what she heard back surprised her. Her colleagues told her the boss liked to check in with his peers on all recommended courses of action, and that he used an iterative process to socialize the proposal, thereby ensuring a greater chance of success. It wasn't that the boss didn't trust Mary; this was just his preferred process for developing a solid recommendation. If your boss likes to work with you on big presentations and likes to evolve the story over time, think about why he's doing this. It might not have anything to do with you.

The biggest area in which you'll encounter your boss's preferred management style is on the day-to-day execution of projects. After the solution has been generated and socialized, the product or service needs to be implemented. Most bosses have distinct opinions about execution and want to be involved in this process, too. Some like to manage the work closely, with lots of update meetings. Others avoid the details, focusing instead on the overall outcome and customer reaction. How does he like to stay engaged during execution? Again, write out his preferences for different scenarios. Some bosses want to read reports; others want to be briefed periodically. Some want these briefings presented in the staff meeting, while others will schedule regular one-on-one sessions.

Know your boss's preferred style of staying up to speed, figure out why he's working from this style, and adapt to it. Don't spend a lot of energy trying to change his style to fit yours: If he likes data-heavy updates, be prepared. If he wants a lot of context, provide it. If you know he favors certain metrics, highlight them. Above all, be calm and flexible because this is your boss's style of managing the work, and you're not going to radically change it.

When the Boss's Style Doesn't Fit

When I starting coaching Melanie, I was surprised by the feedback I collected from her stakeholders. Direct reports loved her, peers admired her, and customers valued her results. So why did she need an executive coach? Because her boss thought she needed to change her approach to navigating the organization. Melanie's style was to experiment with ideas, to be bold and innovative. She was outgoing and wasn't afraid to push the company into new areas. Her boss had a different style; in fact, in my interview with him, he told me that Melanie needed to be "more like me." Specifically, he thought the way to "survive" in the company was to keep

your head down, be deferential toward the senior team, and avoid risks. Reflecting on the feedback, Melanie could see where her boss's career advice was coming from—a perspective of “my way is the only way.” In the end, Melanie chose to maintain the style that had been working for her. But she did change her approach toward her boss. She chose to respectfully challenge his point of view, rather than simply ignoring it. First, she shared her feedback with him, so he could see how the rest of the organization viewed her. Second, she began offering alternative viewpoints whenever he provided career guidance (discussing advice as just one way of looking at the world). Finally, she told him she was going to start working with one of the senior team members in a mentoring relationship. Melanie couldn't change her boss's style or even his world view, but she did change how it impacted her.

Finally, a big part of these common management situations involves decision-making.

Do you know his decision-making process? Does he like a lot of data, or does he make decisions with his gut? Does he make decisions quickly, or is it a drawn-out affair? Before making a decision, does he ask a lot of questions? There's really no excuse for missing the consistent patterns of his decision-making style. The trick here is to study his past decisions to determine what will be required on the current business issue. If it's a decision that impacts your group only, perhaps you just need a convincing business case. But if the decision has broader organizational impact, be aware that his decision will be influenced by far more than just the supporting evidence. His peer relationships, his current standing with his boss, his recent track record of making the right call—all of this will come into play. Most of his decisions will not be black or white; instead, they will be highly dependent on the current vibe in the organization. Learn the overall context so you can make sense of his final decision.

Over time, your boss has dug a deep groove in his routine

for managing work. The behavior is there to be observed; you just need to look deeper to understand why he does what he does. From idea to execution, how does he want to be involved? How does he want to be updated? How and why does he make decisions? Observe the behavior and consider the situation, and you'll start to recognize the patterns. Once you can predict the *what* and *why*, it's up to you to make the right adjustments to his style.



INSIGHTS

Management Style

- *Know how he wants to be engaged in the idea phase.*
- *Be aware of his ongoing engagement style during execution.*
- *Learn his decision-making process.*

Operate within your boss's preferred work style.

3 What behaviors does he reward?

Just like anyone else, your boss values some behaviors more than others. When it comes to your work style or behavior, do you know what he likes and doesn't like? This insight is critical to establishing a good working relationship. Obviously, if you're doing things that annoy him, that's not going to create a solid foundation. You need to learn his preferences and try to work within those boundaries. Yes, that might mean adapting your style a bit, but if you want to improve the relationship, you need to figure out what he wants from you, and make adjustments.

For example, how does he feel about being on time for meetings? Is it acceptable to call and ask for more time on an assignment? Does he like you to run ideas by him, or does he let you make decisions? Does he want to know where you are throughout the day? Does he want you to e-mail back immediately, or do you have until the end of the day? How does he feel about you working from home? Does he want you to stay in touch when you're on vacation? What does he think of your work space?

These may seem like trivial examples, but I've seen every one of these become a big issue. There are dozens of boss preferences you have to learn, from presentation routines and travel habits to meeting behavior and clothing styles. The problem is, your boss won't always say, *This is a big deal to me*—and often, he wants you to figure it out. So if he gets annoyed by late arrivals, be on time for the meeting (in that exact moment, this is what your boss wants from you). If he likes immediate e-mail replies, respond to his question as soon as possible. If he tells you, *Don't even think about the office while you're on vacation* (but you know he doesn't really mean it), trust your instincts and check in occasionally.

I see this “preferences disconnect” all the time in my

coaching practice. I worked with Harriet, who had arranged to start work early in the morning, allowing her to leave at 4:00 p.m. The boss agreed to this arrangement, even though the rest of the team worked a more traditional work schedule. Sure enough, when I was collecting feedback, the boss told me he was concerned about Harriet's habit of leaving early. This is a perfect example of the boss using preferences to judge performance (in this case, favoring people who stayed late). The hours and output were the same, but he was having a difficult time overcoming his own biases. The only recourse for Harriet was to remind him of their agreement and prompt him to stay open-minded about his commitment. But she has to stay alert to his mood on this issue, and be proactive about addressing it.

Another example is Robert, whose boss insisted he copy him on all e-mails sent to any VP (and above) in the organization. The explanation had something to do with "alignment" or "mission clarity" but the underlying reason was pure paranoia. The boss was a control freak and afraid of being left out of the loop. Robert tried to reason with the boss, but wasn't successful—this was his standing e-mail edict. So Robert had two choices: find another role in the company, or learn to live with this relatively minor annoyance. He chose to live with it, and eventually established his own credibility with his boss's peers.

Of course, the flip side of what he prefers is what he doesn't want you doing. Developing a close relationship with one of his peers is often frowned upon. Some bosses don't want you to speak to their boss without them in the room. Others don't want you asking questions in all-hands meetings or volunteering for extra work around the company. Some bosses don't want you going to industry events; others don't want you becoming a known player in your field. Frankly, there are just as many

“don’ts” as there are “do’s” when it comes to what behavior your boss wants from you. The bottom line is that you have to learn both the positive and negative preferences—what he tends to reward and what he disapproves of—in order to truly understand his attitude or actions. I recommend making a do-and-don’t list and checking it with a trusted peer. Don’t get hung up on whether these preferences are right or wrong, or logical or paranoid. Oftentimes they are just minor irritations, but if you ignore them, they can turn into bigger issues for you.

My advice is to study the results, not just the stated direction. In other words, trust what you see, not what he says. Study how he rewards or punishes certain behaviors, and you’ll learn his preferences. Pay attention to what happens to people who meet or miss those preferences. Don’t ignore the clear signs or clues out there; he is sending dozens of signals each day about what he wants from you. All you have to do is raise your level of awareness and react in a way that best serves your overall goal, which is improving the relationship.



INSIGHTS

Rewarded Behaviors

- *Learn what behaviors are acceptable to your boss.*
- *Know what behaviors are unacceptable.*
- *Be aware of the consequences for out-of-bounds behavior.*

Stick to behaviors your boss finds acceptable.

④ What is he trying to accomplish in this role?

If your boss is any good at all, he has an agenda; he's trying to accomplish something big in his role. This is a good thing; you want him to have a vision for the department. If that vision aligns with yours, everything's great. But sometimes his mission is hard to interpret and that's when you need to dig deep to study his true intent.

Start by determining his philosophical views about your function or discipline. How does he see the field? Which experts does he respect and follow? Is he a traditionalist, or does he want to take the function in a new direction? Get a fix on how your boss looks at his profession. Once you know his point of view, determine how it aligns with yours. Do you share the same beliefs about the future of your chosen field?

Amanda is an expert in software development, and was struggling with her boss about the approach to take in developing new products. To clear the air, I brokered a meeting between Amanda and her boss that focused exclusively on their philosophical visions. By taking the conversation up a notch to their broader world views, we were able to find some common connection points. When it comes to interpreting the moves your boss is making, it's important to first understand how he sees his craft; this will explain a lot of his initiatives and behavior.

The second thing you should study is his mandate, as you perceive it. Given his philosophical view of the profession and the challenges facing your organization, what is he trying to accomplish in this role? What's his mission? Most great leaders want to make their mark; they want to do something meaningful. How would you articulate his main objective? Write it out as a statement: "In this role, my boss is trying to ____."

Keeping Up With the CEO

Mark was the head of Sales at a start-up company, and when promoted, he was the third sales leader in 18 months. His feedback indicated that he needed to demonstrate more executive presence and decisiveness. In fact, Mark's biggest issue was his boss, the CEO, who also happened to be the founder. Because the CEO had once been a highly successful head of Sales, Mark was getting a lot of "help" from him. The CEO was constantly bombarding Mark with ideas, suggestions, and changes of direction. I'll admit that at first, Mark and I struggled to plot a course of action; after all, how do you tell the CEO/Founder to stop providing input? After we articulated the CEO's motives (a strong desire to "run" Sales), we crafted a three-pronged strategy: 1) Mark significantly increased his updates to the CEO, particularly decisions; 2) he adopted a calming mindset of *I'm the head of Sales until I'm not*—a simple mantra that represented the confidence and presence he needed to convey in order to handle the CEO's style; and 3) he insisted on a weekly meeting with the CEO to prioritize the flow of ideas and direction. By staying calm, being proactive, and forcing the prioritization of work, Mark enhanced his stature with the boss, *not* by changing the boss, but by taking responsibility for the relationship.

Once you've got a sense for it, ask for validation. Force a clear understanding of what he's trying to accomplish by asking: *How would you describe what you're trying to do in this role?* This is one time I recommend seeking direct clarification with your boss. Chances are, he's proud of the mission and will want to share it. The motives behind the mission will be based on his philosophical view and the current organizational challenges, and you need to know what this mission will require of you.

Finally, you need to figure out where you can impact the strategic direction. If your views differ from his, where and how can you influence and shape his world view? What's the best way to debate or discuss an alternative course of action? Juan

faced this challenge with his boss, who was the head of Human Resources. Juan was the director of talent management, but was unable to come to agreement with his boss on the subject of high-potential talent. In this case, the boss didn't believe in telling high-potential leaders they were top talent; he believed in keeping the list a secret. Juan held the opposite view just as strongly; he believed top-talent leaders should be told they were being groomed for higher levels. By probing the origins of this belief, Juan learned the boss had had a bad experience in his previous company with publicizing the high-potential list, and was reluctant to try it again. Once Juan understood his influencing obstacle, he built a strong case for why things would be different in their current organization.

Figuring out how your boss sees your profession is an important step to figuring out his behavior. Your boss is going to chart a very specific course when it comes to executing his role. He is grounded in a particular world view and is on a mission to accomplish a specific set of goals. Your job is to study both to determine how you best fit into those plans.



INSIGHTS

Objectives

- *Learn his philosophical views on the function.*
- *Know how he views his role's mission.*
- *Determine if there is tolerance for opposing views.*

Know your boss's views on your function and his mission.

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