

LESSONS OF THE SUPERBOSSSES

by *Sydney Finkelstein*

Is there anyone out there not concerned with talent? Time and again, in survey after survey, when CEOs and other senior executives are asked what keeps them up at night, the quest for world-class talent keeps coming up. For example, PwC's seventeenth annual global CEO survey in 2013 found that an incredible 93 percent of surveyed CEOs were changing, or planned to change, their talent strategies. At the same time, there was significant dissatisfaction with Human Resources (HR); only one-third of surveyed CEOs said that HR was well prepared to meet this challenge.

Surely it's time to consider some new ideas. The good news is that if we know where to look, there are some truly remarkable examples of genius HR practices from which we can learn. Ten years ago I set out to find "superbosses," study what they did that was different from so many other leaders, and decode their methods so that any leader, any manager, any boss, can get better at the one essential task they all share: developing world-class talent who can adapt and adjust, learn to get better at whatever they do, and in the final analysis, create value for themselves and their organizations.

I compiled, dissected, and analyzed stories about the lives and careers of eighteen primary superbosses in fields as diverse as casual dining (Norman Brinker), hospitals (Tommy Frist), comic books (Stan Lee), nonprofit endowment investment (David Swensen),

filmmaking (Roger Corman and George Lucas), hedge funds (Julian Robertson), and newspapers (Gene Roberts), among others.

Looking for recurring themes and patterns, I discovered that superbosses differ considerably in their interpersonal styles, but that the ways in which they identify, motivate, coach, and leverage others are remarkably consistent, highly unconventional, and unmistakably powerful. Superbosses aren't like most bosses; they follow a playbook all their own.

Superbosses are supermotivators. They help other people accomplish more than they ever thought possible.

Superbosses create attachments to their people that engender tremendous loyalty and effort. It's almost like a "Stockholm syndrome of leadership": Employees push themselves to their limits for their superboss, but rather than resent the superboss for it, they feel even greater loyalty. They'll do anything to keep from disappointing their superboss. They yearn to please him or her, not only because they've completely bought into the boss's vision but also because they want to believe that their boss was correct in selecting them for the job.

Ron Marston, who worked with HCA CEO and superboss Tommy Frist for years before becoming CEO of Health Care Corporation of America (HCCA), told

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me in an interview, “You never wanted to let Tommy down. If you did, you were harder on yourself not because of anything he did or said but because you knew you failed to live up to his standards.”

Think for a moment how powerful this kind of motivation is. Many companies today measure how engaged or emotionally connected members of their workforce are. In all too many companies, engagement is disappointingly low. For superbosses, engagement is the least of it. They know that to succeed they need the world’s best team, which doesn’t mean just engaged talent—it means energized, supercharged talent.

So how do superbosses do it? The first thing to know is that all superbosses drive their people exceptionally hard. “Everybody knew that Bill demanded results,” said Ronald Blankenship, president and CEO of the Verde Group and longtime associate of superboss real estate mogul Bill Sanders, “and if you were going to work with him, you needed to be prepared to make that the primary focus in your life.” Comedian Andy Samberg remembers that after working for superboss Lorne Michaels at *Saturday Night Live*, acting in movies was a “cakewalk.” “The pressure doesn’t really seem that high. You’ve dealt with this thing that’s *SNL*, which is just this crazy, intense, beautiful pressure cooker.”

In setting ever-higher expectations, superbosses aren’t bound by last year’s figures or by a sense of what “normal” performance would be for an employee in a given position. They’re certainly not bound by what *employees* conceive as their natural limitations. Superbosses want to see how far people can go. They treat staff like Olympic athletes, pushing them to the limit and beyond. As Lee Clow, now chairman of TBWA/Media Arts Lab, put it, Jay Chiat (cofounder of the advertising agency

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Chiat/Day) was “always demanding of everyone to do something better than they very often knew or thought they could or were capable of.”

Isn’t all this hard-charging, whip-cracking pressure ultimately counterproductive? Some employees at superboss-led companies do drop out, but those who remain respond to the continuous and continually expanding intensity by developing an even deeper emotional bond with the superboss. That’s because even though superbosses keep the pressure up, they also inspire performance, emboldening employees to push themselves up. Superbosses “get” that individuals—even the most driven and talented—accomplish so much more when high expectations come with a message of *possibility*. They understand that people will work their hardest to become bigger, better, tougher, more resourceful, and more creative when they first see themselves as these things. And they sense that it is their paramount job as leaders to inject a strong and unforgettable sense of possibility in their workforces.

Superbosses are geniuses at motivation. Unlike some bosses, they don’t want 80 percent of the attention and dedication of their people. They want 100 percent. And they *get* 100 percent. People know when they’re working for a special boss—someone who is changing the rules, is unafraid to take risks, deeply cares about achieving a higher objective, and invites employees to be a part of it. When a boss like *that* is giving orders or, as is more often the case, pushing and inspiring you in a powerful way, you don’t perceive the pressure to perform as tedious or unwelcome. You perceive it as part of a gigantic, unbelievably important and exciting mission. You thrive on this pressure. And, just like your boss, you lose yourself in the mission.

So how do superbosses do it?

It is the superboss's combination of lofty expectations and aspirations, then, that enables the exceptional people under her or his wings to do impossible things. An upward spiral of performance takes root among protégés of superbosses: as they become accustomed to surviving and thriving in an intense environment, their ambitions only increase. They become so addicted to success that they seek out ever-more challenging assignments. And they feel so great upon meeting or exceeding the superboss's expectations that they want to do it again and again. They yearn to be *even closer* to the superboss, her inspiration, his energy, and they will do whatever it takes to stay in the superboss's orbit. It's a cyclone of pressure, success, acknowledgment, rising confidence, and even more success that makes the protégé, the superboss, and the superboss's organization utterly unstoppable. An employee of Jay Chiat summed it up well: "He left something in people that makes it hard for you to go back to being ordinary. Once you feel it, you can't change it."

Superbosses unleash the creativity of their team members to create a continually adapting organization.

It's one thing to motivate your staff to do great things, it's quite another to unleash their potential for innovation. Yet when you look closely at what superbosses do, a clear pattern emerges from which every leader, every manager, and every employee can learn. There are three distinct kinds of action that superbosses take to nurture openness and innovation in their employees. First, superbosses encourage continual risk taking and rule breaking. Kyle Craig, former chairman and CEO of Steak and Ale, remembered that his superboss Norman Brinker "would challenge you. He would say, 'What do you think you could do there? What is working? Go try something.' It was very

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empowering because it gave you a license to say, 'We *can* do some things differently!'"

The second way superbosses nurture openness is by removing anxieties that get in the way of people doing new things. If you analyze why individuals in your workplace just don't seem to come up with anything new, I bet you'll find that fear of failure plays an outsized role. This isn't such an irrational fear, either; in many companies, failure is a dirty word. Mess up and you get labeled as unreliable, incompetent, or worse. Superbosses, of course, don't think about failure the way most people do. Rather, they are masters at reframing failure as an opportunity in disguise. By implication, they don't *fear* failure but instead view it as just a step you sometimes take on the way to success.

Another way superbosses help protégés overcome any reluctance to innovate is by creating new opportunities for them to contribute. Hedge fund impresario Julian Robertson would sit in the middle of his company's large workroom and loudly debate ideas his analysts presented. Not every analyst who volunteered an idea got a pat on the back; when Robertson thought an idea was dumb, he would say so, according to one former associate: "He would say things like, 'You say this company has got some great product, and I just called so-and-so and he said the product is just terrible.'" Employees understood that unfettered debate was simply Robertson's style, that he deeply appreciated new ideas, and that they didn't need to fear pushback from him. Robertson's office became what so many offices today aren't: a safe space for fresh thinking and experimentation.

A third way superbosses nurture openness and innovation is by encouraging their employees or

associates to never, ever rest on their laurels. Miles Davis, in the book *Miles: The Autobiography of Miles Davis*, said, “To be and stay a great musician, you’ve got to always be open to what’s new, what’s happening at the moment. You have to be able to absorb it if you’re going to continue to grow and communicate your music.” Time and again I found that superbosses were consummate cool hunters—always on the prowl for the next great product idea, the next great trend, the next great person to hire. Speaking of *Saturday Night Live*, comedian and SNL alum Conan O’Brien told writers Tom Shales and James Andrew Miller in their book *Live from New York* that “you always get the sense that the show is almost like a shark that’s constantly on a mission to find what’s new, what’s hot, what are people into now? And chomp its teeth into it.”

A superboss’s cool hunting can take any number of forms. Norman Brinker was so good at anticipating emerging restaurant industry trends because he was continually probing the minds of consumers. Not content to peruse the usual market research reports, Brinker would spend hours in his restaurants, talking to customers and staff, developing a reputation in the industry for his approachability and willingness to learn.

Employees of superbosses get swept up in a whirlwind of continual innovation. Superbosses energize people around them to inject creativity into their work each and every day. The result is not merely great wealth and influence for the superboss; it’s a lifetime of career success for those lucky enough to become his protégés.

Superbosses have resurrected the apprenticeship model of employee development.

So much of how people learn in the workplace today, from 360-degree performance evaluations to mentoring to coaching, has become bureaucratized and impersonal. Most competent bosses today generally don’t prioritize engaging reports informally in an immersive learning experience. Aiming for more certainty and clarity in their organizations, they promulgate rules and establish bureaucracies that distance them from employees. They also choreograph their days to assure that work gets done, leaving very little unstructured time for instructing or coaching. They certainly don’t use the

word *apprentice* very much. The very concept seems quaint, the product of a bygone age.

Superbosses embrace the apprenticeship model wholeheartedly as a way of doing business. When they hire, they *know* they are giving an employee a chance to learn a craft at their feet. Staying in the trenches with protégés and serving as something akin to a player-coach, superbosses use this informal manner of instruction not only to convey knowledge but to also exert a powerful, almost parental influence on their protégés.

The most basic and critical set of practices underlying the apprenticeship model concerns simply being there with employees, getting to know them, and letting them in. You can’t develop a personal approach to training staff if you aren’t there in person (or, if necessary, via communications technology), day in and day out. Yet most bosses don’t do this—in fact, they don’t even come close. The CEOs appearing on the hit television show *Undercover Boss* are, sadly, not all that unusual. Imagine resorting to impersonating low-level employees to find out what’s going on in your own company. These clueless, distanced bosses are the complete antithesis of the superboss. Whereas many businesses today focus on getting closer to the customer, superbosses are very much focused on getting closer to their employees or team members.

Tommy Frist, who was also a pilot, would sometimes fly his protégés to events in other cities, letting them sit in the copilot’s seat and talking business with them. The world-renowned conducting teacher Jorma Panula would spend all day with his students, and then he would invite them to a restaurant to talk even more. The *Philadelphia Inquirer*’s Gene Roberts was known to stay up until 2:00 in the morning talking to staffers—at his home.

In the corporate world, employees who seek to speak with their bosses normally attempt to “book time.” They might send an email to an assistant, and the resulting “meeting” occurs outside of the “actual work” being done. Such practices seem to bring bosses and employees closer together, but in reality they distance and control the degree of contact bosses have with staff. While today’s hyper-scheduled executives obviously need to control their time, we often forget about what we lose when we run from event to event—the casual, ongoing

contact *in the moment* that is essential for learning, serendipity, and building meaningful relationships.

Protégés of all superbosses related similar powerful, career-shaping lessons they learned during the course of informal, apprentice-style interactions. Superbosses deliver multiple layers of lessons at once. First, they teach technical nuances about their business—insights employees can't get anywhere else—as well as memorable reminders of the fundamentals that protégés are already expected to know. If you want to learn the finer points of running a newspaper, who better to teach you than Gene Roberts? If you want to learn the secrets of starting a successful restaurant chain, who better than Norman Brinker?

Just as valuable is a second layer of lessons, the make-or-break advice superbosses impart on how to run businesses and lead organizations. Billionaire entrepreneur and designer Tory Burch credits Ralph Lauren with teaching her “the importance of having a complete vision for a company, from product to marketing to store visuals.” Alice Waters taught Gayle Ortiz, now chef and owner of Gayle’s Bakery in San Francisco, how to “pay attention to detail and demand perfection” in all aspects of a restaurant’s operation, a lesson that became “my main focus of the way that I looked at business.”

Finally, on a day-to-day basis, superbosses customize their general teaching style to fit the individual. “He didn’t react the same way to everyone,” saxophonist Bill Evans said of Miles Davis. “Everyone was different and personal to him, and that is one of the things that he was able to do . . . get to know each person and what each person needed. Some people he would be harder on than others. He was interesting in that way.” Of Julian Robertson, hedge fund executive Chase Coleman said, “He was very good at understanding some combination of what motivated people and how to extract maximum performance out of people. For some people, that was encouraging them, and for other people, it was making them feel less comfortable.”

Conclusion

Superbosses do something that every leader needs to do: they help other people accomplish more than they ever

thought possible. It gets back to one of the best definitions of leadership I ever heard: leaders are people who create other leaders. In a world of continual change, driven by globalization, technology, and economic and geopolitical shocks that seem to happen on a regular basis, the need for world-class leadership has never been greater. The best news of all is that the superboss playbook can be learned, and disseminated, by any individual leader and in any organization, as long as that leader is willing to invest the time and energy to make it happen.



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