

“Best Boss” Insights

For Improving Employee Performance and Development

By John Furcon, Transforming Talent and Organizations; Toni Pristo, Pristo Consulting; and Duncan Ferguson, Vantage Leadership Consulting

Here’s a pair of questions that almost invariably stop a social or professional networking conversation in its tracks, and draws the attention of all within earshot: “Who was the best boss you ever worked for?” “Why?”

In our experience, these questions usually spark two immediate reactions. The first is an emotional reaction, ordinarily quite positive. The second is a quick anecdote or description recounting a poignant episode that conveys the actions of a past or present supervisor, and the impact on the speaker. We continue to be amazed at the strength of the emotional response and the extent of the long-term impact of these “best boss” experiences.

STUDY DESCRIPTION

To investigate this leadership bond in a more substantive manner, we developed a web-based questionnaire that examined the specific experiences and impacts of the “best boss” relationship. A panel of 50 seasoned executives, managers and professionals provided complete responses. Our content analysis of these replies is outlined below.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Ingredients of the “Best Boss” Relationship

We identified five behavioral elements repeatedly evidenced in direct reports’ descriptions of experiences with their “best boss”:

- **Leads from a Higher Purpose**—The “best boss” demonstrates a purpose beyond self-interest/self-profit and/or a positive purpose beyond the organization and its interests that is put into action on behalf of the subordinate through a genuine relationship.
- **Activates Potential**—The “best boss” observes, values, acknowledges and takes steps to activate and reinforce the present capability and future potential of the individual.
- **Develops Business Acumen and Action Orientation**—The “best boss” imparts knowledge, business acumen and big-picture thinking; establishes

clear expectations; and creates an autonomous space for the individual to perform.

- **Conveys Pervasive Feedback**—The “best boss” doesn’t miss an opportunity to provide ongoing constructive and reinforcing feedback to the subordinate.
- **Encourages Risk Taking Via Continuous Learning**—The “best boss” fuels reasoned risk taking and constant learning/development by “allowing” mistakes and then “mining” the learning from them, thus continually developing employee potential.

Our analysis indicated that these elements did not operate independently but were actually key ingredients of an integrated, synergistic “best boss” process, as depicted in Figure 1. The elements worked in concert to engage, motivate, develop, and drive better performance on the part of the subordinate.

Of particular note, we found that the “Activates Potential” component was by far the most mentioned of any element, proving to be the most significant linchpin for the “best boss” process.

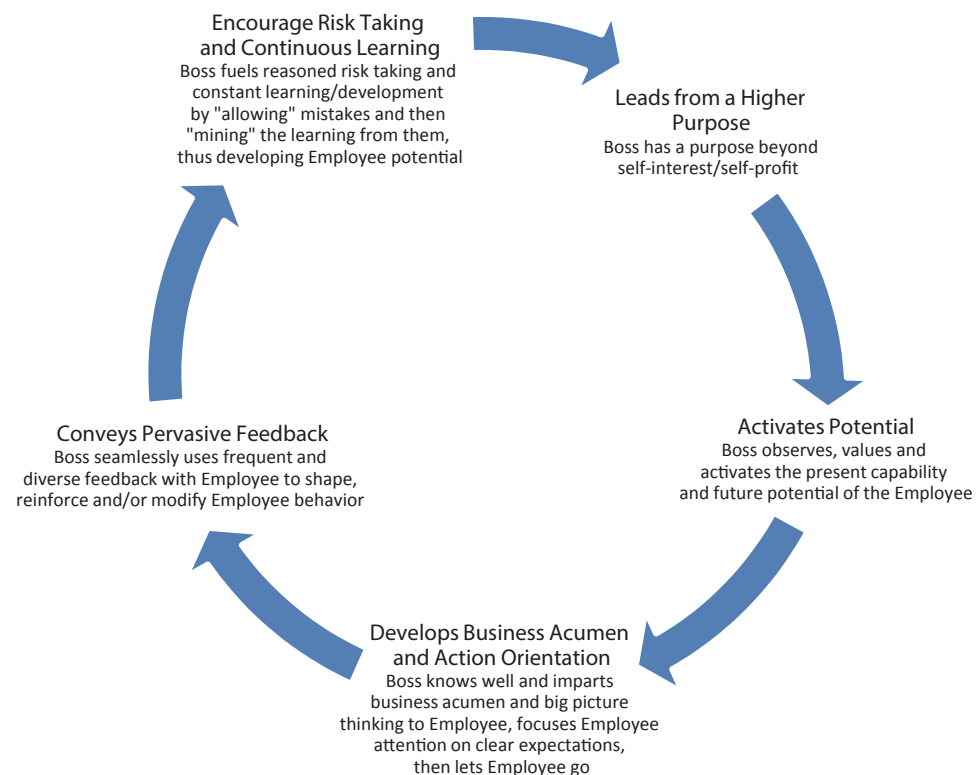
Relationships and Characteristics

We learned that relationships and characteristics were two critical elements that were essential in building a foundation that allowed the “best boss” process to thrive. Relationships could be one-dimensional or multidimensional (e.g., collegial, personal, mentoring), but in every case a strong relationship was formed between the “best boss” and the individual. This relationship had a powerful and lasting impact on the subordinate’s self-confidence, personal development, sense of empowerment, job performance, and life perspective. In a number of instances, this personal relationship continued for decades afterward.

While no two “best bosses” had the same set of personal characteristics, we did identify seven key personal characteristics that respondents used with some frequency to describe “best bosses”:

1. Humble, unassuming, approachable, “down to earth” person
2. Bright; very smart

FIGURE 1. Elements and Dynamics of the Synergistic “Best Boss” Relationship



3. Positive, optimistic, “can do” attitude
4. Fair and ethical
5. Demonstrates a sense of humor; funny
6. Thoughtful and thorough
7. Respectful

Each of these characteristics appears to help facilitate a generative and trusting work relationship. Their absence would likely have a chilling effect on the development of a work relationship beyond what was absolutely necessary to get the work done.

Impact of the “Best Boss”

Our results evidence numerous examples of the impact of the “best boss” experience on individual, work group and organizational performance; on individual development; and on realization of full potential. We believe organizations can expect a very significant ROI from investments in developing “best boss” know-how and skills in supervisors and managers. Beyond this, there will be significant impact on personal values, life perspective and organizational culture. “Best boss” behaviors establish a virtuous, synergistic cycle that impacts discretionary effort, performance, development, bench strength and climate.

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A 2013 survey conducted by SilkRoad casts greater light on this. A lack of time commitment to the process, followed by a lack of budget to support it, were the leading reasons survey respondents gave for failed executive onboarding initiatives.²

“The cost of employee turnover,” according to an article in *WorldatWork Journal*, “often ranges from 50 percent to 200 percent of the employee’s annual salary based on the type and level of job he/she holds.”³ It is difficult to refute the premise that executive turnover—especially that which occurs early in the leader’s tenure—is expensive. Given the proper commitment and investment, it can be avoided.

The Solution for Success

When asked, “What was or would be the main driver for your organization to adopt an executive onboarding process,” 59 percent of respondents in the CPI–Kensington International survey indicated the need to accelerate the success of both the leader and

2. SilkRoad & HRZone Onboarding Survey Results, 2013.

3. “Retention of Key Talent and the Role of Rewards,” *WorldatWork Journal*, Fourth Quarter, 2012.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

These findings shed new light on the elements and dynamics of the potent performance-enhancing and developmental relationship between boss and subordinate. Better understanding of this experience, and the application of these learnings, can have a dramatic effect on individual, work group and even organization-wide performance.

Leads from a Higher Purpose

Frequent explicit reference to the “best boss” being motivated by something beyond immediate job performance or financial results has clear implications for selection and development of supervisors.

Activates Potential

The definition of assignments has tremendous implications for discretionary effort, performance, development, loyalty and engagement. In contrast, these are grave findings for managers who have difficulty delegating, seek perfection or micromanage.

Develops Business Acumen and Action Orientation

Frequent reference to the “best boss” operat-

ing from a bigger picture evidences the importance of developing systems thinking on the part of both managers and employees.

the organization. That driver clearly outpaced all other response options including avoiding turnover and the cost of hiring new talent.

Well-planned and effective executive onboarding processes typically include elements that:

- Clarify role expectations for the executive and stakeholders.
- Outline success criteria/parameters.
- Identify early organizational wins.
- Enhance self-awareness and leadership style for success.
- Drive understanding of organizational culture and patterns for a positive impact.
- Align goals with organizational vision.
- Evaluate your team and identify high potentials and behaviors necessary for success.
- Develop coalitions and relationships across the enterprise.

Conclusion

Executive onboarding is far too important to leave to chance. The stakes are high for the individuals and corporations involved. The

ing from a bigger picture evidences the importance of developing systems thinking on the part of both managers and employees.

Conveys Pervasive Feedback

Without timely feedback, the integrated sequence of activating potential and developing broader business acumen is incomplete, and the boss is less likely to establish and maintain the requisite level of authenticity and trust that are the hallmarks of the “best boss” relationship.

Encourages Risk Taking and Continuous Learning

A key requirement for those aspiring to be a “best boss” is to clarify expectations concerning mistakes and develop and then live out a protocol that promotes learning when mistakes do occur.

One Final Question

For many respondents, this experience took on a “once in a lifetime” character. Why not aim to have the “best boss” experience be the norm, rather than the rare exception in a person’s work and life? •

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impact on revenues, employee morale and the company’s corporate image when an executive fails in a newly assigned role are felt by the company long after the executive has departed.

When establishing or enhancing an existing executive onboarding program for both internal moves and external hires, the following key factors will drive better onboarding outcomes:

- Make onboarding an integral part of the overall talent management process.
- Ensure clear ownership on the part of the executive and solid support on the part of management.
- Begin the onboarding process even before the executive assumes the new role.
- Be open to continual refinement of the process.

Developing and implementing a thorough executive onboarding process generates a high return on investment that pays dividends.

For the complete article and related case study, please visit: <http://bit.ly/ExecutiveOnboarding>. •