

F² Leadership: Be Firm but Fair

People don't leave jobs; they leave bosses.

Anonymous

By

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Congratulations. You're the boss. That means either you own the company; you are related to someone who owns the company; or someone thought you had the expertise, experience, or potential to be the leader. One of these applies, or you know something regarding moral turpitude about your boss. However you got here, here you are. Chances are no one has really prepared you for this job. In college you studied, engineering, marketing, accounting, nursing, or some other job function. Maybe you even took a course or two in management, but did anyone ever really teach you the skills it takes to be the boss? Probably not. You, like millions of others, are in this position but are not prepared for all the responsibilities that go with it. If you aren't smart, honest, and hard working, this article won't help. If you are, and you want to learn the requisite skills to be an F² Leader, one that is both firm and fair, you will be able to make a difference in your life and the lives of your direct reports.

As the Baby Boomers look toward retirement, the Generation Xers are looking forward to filling the leadership roles that will be vacated. However, the next generation of leaders will face unprecedented challenges in the war for talent. As has happened in the past, people will continue to leave bosses, not jobs. But when people leave, there will be fewer top performers to fill key positions. The competition for talent will escalate, and only those companies who have hired bosses that no one wants to leave will be able to vie in the global marketplace. In general, research shows that in a good economy, an unhappy employee will bolt the company for a five percent pay increase, but it will take at least an increase of twenty percent to compel a satisfied employee to jump ship.

Although there seems to be universal agreement that people want to be better bosses, the task of determining what that means seems daunting. Perhaps one of the best ways to answer some of the questions that continue to surface is to describe to discuss some of the most important ways leaders can sustain F² Leadership so that they attract and keep the best and brightest in their industries. One thing seems clear: bosses need to be concerned with both task accomplishment and people skills, the essence of F² Leader.

Specifically, what does it take to be a good leader? It takes a desire to lead, the intelligence to learn quickly, the analytical reasoning to solve unfamiliar, complex problems, a strong action orientation, integrity, and people skills. In short, it takes a balanced concern for task accomplishment and people issues, F² Leadership. Intelligence and achievement drive are resistant to change and difficult to develop but people skills are easier to learn. The good news is, often leadership derailment is caused by flawed interpersonal skills, so bosses who possess the other characteristics can learn the one set of skills that is likely to have the greatest impact on their success. Becoming firm but fair leaders that others trust is at the heart of sustaining effective leadership.

One of the toughest aspects of developing better interpersonal skills is the tricky balance leaders need to have for concern for people and concern for results. Without a strong bias for action, leaders are not successful. Effective leadership demands dominance, the exercising of control or influence. It means being assertive, putting forward ideas, and striving to influence the way others turn ideas into action. Dominant leaders take charge, guiding, leading, persuading, and moving other people to achieve results. Instead of *letting* things happen, they *make* things happen.

Without a strong concern for the people who get the results, however, bosses aren't effective either. Balancing dominance and responsiveness requires constant recalibration, a challenge that even the most seasoned leaders face. Here are some ideas to help you get results while still being responsive to others:

- Demand results through involvement. Set tough goals and insist on analytical approaches.
- Get to know your people, their strengths, their weaknesses, and their motivators, and then deal with each person as a unique individual.

- Maintain an “us centered” mentality.
- Demonstrate concern and responsiveness. Rather than merely trying to please direct reports for the moment, work with them to uncover their concerns and then balance these with the needs of the organization.
- Put disagreements and problems on the table as soon as you perceive them. Don’t wait until you are angry or until a crisis is brewing to talk about things.

Sustaining a dedication to excellent results and a commitment to your people will be a huge step toward building trust, an essential component of strong leadership. Although personal integrity is essential for building a trusting, trustworthy organization, it isn’t enough. Developing *behaviors* that indicate that the integrity is there is also crucial. Like interpersonal skills, the behaviors can be taught and learned, even if the integrity upon which they are based is not easily changed.

Building trust within an organization is a complicated and fragile process that requires unwavering attention on the part of the leaders at all levels of the organization. Here are some actions any boss can take immediately:

- Send consistent messages. One of the fastest moving destroyers of trust, inconsistent messages, can occur at any level of the organization. Often bosses are helpless to do anything about the strategic or organizational trust issues in their companies, but they can certainly make sure that they are not guilty of sending mixed or inconsistent messages. An element of trust is predictability. Direct reports want to know they can trust their bosses to do what they say they will. For instance, the boss who tells her direct reports how much she values them and then doesn’t keep scheduled appointments with them, takes calls or other interruptions when they are meeting, or shows up late for meetings, is sending the message loud and clear that indeed they are *not* important to her. Employees who have this kind of boss can be counted on to disengage, focus on rumors and politics, and update their resumés.
- Keep policies and standards consistent. When bosses play favorites and allow a few pet performers to bend the rules, others notice. Consider the boss who doesn’t like confrontation. He turns a blind eye to the fact that a select few are not adhering to the company’s rules regarding flex time, signing in and out, using work time for doctor’s appointments, etc. If there is a rule, everyone should be required to uphold it. If it’s not important enough to have a company policy about, don’t bother with it. The HOT stove form of leadership applies here. No matter who touches the stove, it’s hot, and the person touching it will get burned, no matter the person’s position in the organization or the favor the boss feels for the person who touches it.
- Don’t have a policy about something unless you are willing to fire your most valuable employee for violating it. In other words, if it is important enough to make a rule about it, it’s important enough that the company’s star will be fired for violating it.

- Expect competence, high-quality performance, and decent behavior from everyone. Whether the person is a genius, technical expert, top salesperson, rainmaker, or company curmudgeon, the same standards should apply, but often they don't. Bosses tend to leave alone people who operate at one end of the continuum or the other. Too often top performers get away with volatile behavior and tantrums, both appalling behavior in any organization. On the other hand, the difficult employee can also get away with unacceptable behavior simply because the boss doesn't want the confrontation that is likely to occur if he addresses issues with the direct report. Once again, others notice, and they resent the company tolerating problematic employees.
- Give honest, balanced feedback. How many times have I had conversations with frustrated human resource managers because obviously a person needs to be fired, but the performance reviews are glowing? A legitimate question a lawyer would ask in a wrongful termination hearing might be, "If this employee was bad enough to fire, how do you explain these scores on his last appraisal?" In addition to causing headaches for the company, this kind of dishonest feedback fails to help the direct report develop skills or take actions to better performance. Similarly, if everyone is given the same bonus and raises, what is the incentive for others to work hard to uphold stellar performance? It may come from within, but only for a while. People tend to object to unfair treatment that they can't control. The boss who engages in flawed feedback is inviting others to weigh in by voting with their feet as they walk out the door.
- Trust others. One of the phenomena of human behavior that often goes unnoticed is that *trustworthy* people are also usually *trusting* people. As the saying goes, a man only looks behind a door if he has hidden behind several himself. If a boss can't trust his direct reports, one of two things is wrong. Either he is not willing to trust because of his own doubts, or the direct report has given him reason not to trust her.

Conclusion

Understanding more about how to become the boss that no one wants to leave begins with an understanding of what a boss is. Then, each person must ask the tough question, "Do I really want to be the boss?" Finally, the person who steps up to the plate needs to know how to do what it takes to succeed. Only after a person has this foundation can she or he begin the formidable task of learning what needs to be done to win. Specifically, this journey will require some skills related to taking care of oneself, some abilities to lead each individual, and a grasp of what it takes to lead a group of people, either a team of direct reports or an entire organization. The principles are the same, even though they are not easy to practice at any level to achieve F² Leadership. But what worthwhile things are easy? As Tom Hank's character said in *A League of Their Own*, "If it were easy, anyone could do it."

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