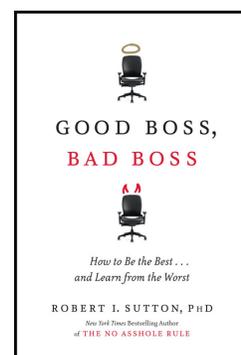


## Good Boss, Bad Boss: How to Be the Best... and Learn from the Worst

By Robert I. Sutton



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Are you a good boss, or a bad boss?

Are you in tune with how your actions affect your followers? Do you know what your staff *really* thinks of you? If your employees had a choice, would they continue to work for you?

No matter where you currently stand, there's no doubt that there's always room for improvement. So let's say you want to get better. How do you go about it?

Good Boss, Bad Boss is devoted to answering that very question. Dr. Robert Sutton of Stanford University weaves together the best psychological and management research with real-life stories and pertinent case studies to paint a precise – and at times even startling – account of what the best (and the worst) bosses do. Good Boss, Bad Boss was inspired by the deluge of emails, phone calls, and other conversations that were triggered by Sutton's blockbuster first book, The No Asshole Rule. These sometimes inspiring, and other times heart-breaking stories taught Sutton that most of us truly need and want a whole lot more than just an asshole-free workplace. In actual fact, we aspire to work for an all-around *great* boss; somebody with the skill and character to inspire superior effort, commitment, and dignity in the workplace.

For his new book, Sutton deliberately chose the word “boss” rather than leader, because boss implies an authority figure that has direct and frequent contact with his or her subordinates. A boss, in the truest sense of the word, is responsible for personally directing and evaluating the work of relatively small groups of people – men and women the boss usually knows quite well – right down on the shop floor. In this regard, Sutton's book is *not* about what it takes to set the strategy for a large enterprise, or be a great CEO for a multi-national company with hundreds, if not thousands, of underlings (most of whom the CEO barely knows, or has never even met.) No,

Good Boss, Bad Boss is for the folks who are working in the trenches; who get their hands dirty each and every day (metaphorically or otherwise.) It's for those of us who do the *real* work.

Good Boss, Bad Boss focuses on the differences between the best and worst bosses. Chapter by chapter, Sutton methodically compares and contrasts the best and worst moves that bosses tend to make when performing essential day-to-day tasks like taking charge, making wise decisions, turning talk into action, and motivating their teams. Most of the research Sutton draws upon compares “better versus worse” actions that bosses take. He does this because the nuances and impact of doing the right thing become crystal clear when placed alongside the wrong thing. If you are a boss, you can save yourself a lot of grief by considering the screw-ups and setbacks of others. Or, as former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt is credited with saying: “Learn from the mistakes of others. You can't live long enough to make them all yourself.”

## **Why Bosses Matter**

Did you know that there are at least 21 million bosses in the United States, with estimates running as high as 38 million? Many of them are great. But unfortunately, some are not.

No matter what field you're in, the difference between having a bad boss and a good boss matters a lot. This is borne out by a huge pile of studies. For starters, having a good boss is good for your health. For example, a Swedish study that followed 3,122 working men for ten years found that those with the best bosses (e.g., who were considerate, specified clear goals, and got changes implemented) suffered fewer heart attacks than those with bad bosses.

Not surprisingly, bosses also matter a great deal in terms of employee retention, engagement and performance. A recent Gallup surveys of over 100,000 employees in more than 2,500 diverse businesses showed that “managers trump companies.” Employees' immediate bosses have far more impact on engagement and performance than whether their companies are rated as great or lousy places to work. Related research shows that good bosses are also especially crucial to employee performance in otherwise lousy workplaces. As leadership researcher Robert Hogan concludes from these studies and surveys: “people do not quit organizations, they quit bad bosses.” Interestingly, people also *stay* with bad companies if they like their boss.

In businesses where a higher proportion of employees report that their immediate bosses care about them, employee satisfaction, retention and productivity are higher. And so is profitability.

The research is clear: most employees want – and need – to work for a wonderful boss. And, if you're like most bosses, you aspire to become the best one you can be. The question is how?

### **The Good Boss Mindset**

According to Sutton, the best bosses embrace these five beliefs, which taken together form a “good boss mindset.”

#### *1. Don't Crush the Bird*

The first belief centers on being largely hands-off with your charges. But not *entirely* hands-off.

Maintaining the right balance of empowerment and control is crucial. And according to Sutton, there are few bosses who did it better than the great baseball manager Tommy Lasorda. Lasorda served the L.A. Dodgers as both a player and a coach since 1949, including a twenty-year stint as manager. Speaking about his management philosophy, Lasorda once famously remarked: “I believe that managing is like holding a dove in your hand. If you hold it too tightly, you kill it, but if you hold it too loosely, you lose it.” Sutton loves this analogy, as it captures the delicate balance that every good boss seeks between managing too much versus too little.

“Effective bosses know it is sometimes best to leave their people alone,” writes Sutton. “They realize that keeping too a close eye on people often either has no effect on their performance, or actually undermines it.” This is in sharp contrast to micromanagers, who wrongly believe their relentless attention and unwanted advice bolsters performance.

Especially when you're working with smart, talented people under you, the best management is usually less management. Or even no management at all. For example, William Coyne, who led 3M's R&D efforts for over a decade, believed a big part of his job was to leave his people alone and protect them from other curious executives. As he put it: “After you plant a seed in the ground, you don't dig it up every week to see how it is doing.” To this day, Coyne's

philosophy remains alive and well at 3M. And 3M remains one of the world's most innovative firms.

But to be clear, good bosses don't just ignore their people or shower them with unconditional warm fuzziness. There are times when bosses need to coach people, discipline, communicate direction, and interject in hundreds of other little ways. We'll speak more on that shortly.

## *2. Grit Gets You There*

According to Sutton, the best bosses think and act like they are "running a marathon, not a sprint." In practice, what this means is, great bosses don't suddenly appear in order to lead their teams to a dramatic victory now and then, and then disappear off the grid for awhile. Rather, great bosses show slow and steady perseverance and passion toward long-term goals.

Another word for perseverance is "grit." And it's a critical quality that Sutton argues is highly undervalued in today's workforce relative to other qualities, such as intelligence. Intelligence is important, but it's often wasted. Interestingly, Albert Einstein saw himself as gritty rather than brilliant and once said: "It's not that I am so smart, it is just that I stay with my problems longer."

Great bosses also instill grit in their followers. They are dogged and patient, pressing themselves and others to move ever forward, one step at a time. Just as importantly, gritty bosses create a sense of urgency with their teams, without treating everything as one giant emergency.

## *3. Small Wins Are the Path*

Having long-term goals, and doggedly working toward them day after day, is a hallmark of bosses with grit. Big hairy audacious goals set the strategic direction and excite people. But according to Sutton, if big goals are all you've got, then you're a bad boss. The path to success is paved with small wins, he explains. Throughout history, even the most glorious discoveries, conquests and victories rested on a string of modest, but constructive steps forward.

"As a boss, framing what you and your people do as a series of manageable steps leads to better decisions, sustains motivation, and helps people experience less distress," writes Sutton. As such, the best bosses break down longer-term problems into more digestible bite-sized pieces.

They also talk and act like each little task is something that people can complete without great difficulty. Doing so instills calmness and confidence, and spurs constructive action.

#### 4. *Beware the Toxic Tandem*

“Being a boss is much like being a high-status primate in any group,” writes Sutton. “The creatures just beneath you in the pecking order carefully watch every move you make. And so they probably know a whole lot more about you than you know about them.”

Anthropologists who study chimpanzees, gorillas, and baboons report that “followers look at the leader, while the opposite does not happen as regularly or intensely.” Studies of families of baboons show that a typical member glances at the alpha male every twenty or thirty seconds. And amazingly, modern office environments work much the same way. Psychologist Susan Fiske observes: “Attention is directed up the hierarchy. Secretaries know more about their bosses than vice-versa; graduate students know more about their advisors than vice-versa.”

If you’re the boss, this constant attention is all fine and well if you remember to behave yourself. But unfortunately, according to the author, too many bosses quickly become accustomed to such scrutiny and then start talking, and acting, as if they are oblivious to it. It’s bad enough if you behave badly at work. But if you’re the boss, the problem is compounded because your actions are scrutinized so closely by subordinates. Sutton calls this effect the *toxic tandem*.

#### 5. *Have Their Backs*

The fifth and perhaps most crucial element of the good boss mindset is to always have your employees backs (and to be seen as doing so too.) According to Sutton’s research, a hallmark of effective bosses everywhere is that they doggedly protect their people. Great bosses will battle on their people’s behalf, he says, even when they may suffer personally as a result.

How can you know whether you truly have your employees’ backs? Ask yourself, do you see your number one responsibility as caring for and protecting your team, and fighting for them when necessary? Or do you consider it too much trouble to advocate for resources they need, or too personally risky from a career perspective to battle idiocy from on high? Also ask

yourself, when your people screw up, do you take the heat or hang them out to dry? And when you screw up, do you admit it or point the finger of blame at your innocent underlings?

Being a great boss isn't just about getting things done, argues Sutton. Of course, it's important to deliver, he says. But bosses ought to be judged both by what they and their people get done *and* by how their followers feel along the way. In Sutton's opinion, bosses who drive their people hard to crank out lots of work, but crush their spirits along the way, are bad bosses.

### **Take Control**

In addition to having a "good boss mindset," with the five key characteristics described above, good bosses typically exhibit certain other behaviors, including a general willingness to "take control" when the circumstances warrant. On paper, this may sound easy. But, in practice, depending on the personalities in the room, and other things at play, there can be challenges.

Still, if you want to be a successful boss, Sutton argues that you must be able to convince people that your words and deeds pack a punch. If your subordinates don't believe in their hearts and minds that you are truly in charge, writes Sutton, then your job will be impossible to do and your life will be hell. Good bosses know what it takes to magnify the illusion of control.

According to Sutton, it all starts with acting confident, even when you aren't. Confidence is vital because, like all emotions, it is contagious and will spread to followers. And the great thing about acting confident in our leadership abilities is that, over time, we actually *become* more confident. This idea is supported by research on attitude change, which shows that, where confidence is concerned, belief *follows* behavior, as opposed to the other way around. So if you're a newly minted boss, "faking it until you make it" can trigger a self-fulfilling prophecy.

No matter what field you're in, confidence is key. For instance, history shows that confidence, perhaps more so than any other leadership quality he may have possessed, is the main reason that General George Washington was effective on the battlefield, even though he screwed up constantly when he was first learning the job. At first, General Washington made many mistakes, like putting his faith in lousy subordinates, making bad decisions that killed

soldiers, and suffering from bouts of indecision. But he always looked and acted confidently in charge.

Being definitive is also crucial to maintaining an aura of leadership. “The best bosses,” writes Sutton, “realize that making crisp decisions bolsters their control. Definitive decisions make it easier for people to know what to do next. Answering employees with a clear ‘yes’ or ‘no’, and doing so quickly, is especially constructive. If the answer to a suggestion or request is yes, then people can move to implement it. If the answer is a no, they can turn their efforts elsewhere.”

If you’re the boss, it’s also appropriate and necessary if you talk more than others – but not the whole time. This is sometimes called “the blabbermouth” theory of leadership. At least in Western countries, people who talk more are usually seen as “our leaders” and “influential.” But don’t talk the whole time, warns Sutton, as people will see you as a bully, boring, or both.

Also, just to keep our people a *tiny bit* on edge, Sutton suggests we throw in a little flash of anger now and then. As studies by Stanford professor Larissa Tiedens show, using anger strategically via outbursts, snarling looks, and controlled hand gestures like pointing “create the impression that the expresser is competent.” So, used in small doses and with proper precautions, flashes of anger can help you seize control. “But spewing out constant venom undermines your authority and will earn you a reputation as an asshole,” warns Sutton.

When it comes to meetings, if you’re trying to gain control of the room, and if there’s an option of whether to sit down or stand up, Sutton suggests standing up. This is especially crucial if you are a new boss. Standing up signals you are in charge, and encourages others to accept your authority. Also, he recommends sitting at the head of the table if in fact that’s where you belong.

Another clever tactic is to voluntarily give away some of your power or status, but make sure everyone knows it was your choice to do so. “One of the most effective ways to show that you are powerful and benevolent is to accept some status symbol for yourself and then to give it to others,” writes Sutton. “One boss I worked with started out in a huge corner office. But as he established his authority in other ways, and he came to realize there was a space crunch, he

voluntarily moved to a much smaller office so his big one could be shared by four employees. In this case, giving up a corner office actually helped solidify the boss's standing."

### **Get and Give Credit**

Of course, being a good boss isn't just about successfully commanding control. It's also about giving credit. "A wonderful thing about being the boss is that when your people do good work, you usually get more credit than you deserve," writes Sutton. "Smart bosses pass this credit along." Sure, some bosses will grab excessive praise because they are arrogant blowhards. But effective bosses never hoard credit. These bosses know that, in order for them to be seen as competent over the long-term, their subordinates need to believe there is a strong link between their individual actions, and the boss's performance. Believe it or not, most people want to work for bosses that are winners, provided they too are also recognized as winners.

### **Get Rid of Rotten Apples**

According to the author, you can always tell a good boss from a bad one based on the way she deals with chronic non-performers and trouble-makers. The best bosses know they have to move quickly to eliminate problem employees, because even a few bad apples and destructive acts can undermine many good people and constructive acts. The case for expelling the worst offenders is bolstered by compelling research on "bad apples." One team of researchers studied what Sutton calls deadbeats ("withholders of effort"), downers (those who "express pessimism, anxiety, insecurity, and irritation," a toxic breed of de-energizer), and assholes (those who frequently violate "interpersonal norms of respect"). The researchers found that teams with just one deadbeat, downer, or asshole suffered a performance disadvantage of 30–40 percent compared to teams that have no bad apples. Good bosses understand this, and take action.

Now, if you're the boss, it may be tempting to look the other way when you're dealing with a borderline problem employee, and just hope for the best. But you do so at your own peril, warns Sutton. This is because rotten apples – even borderline ones – can be very destructive because "bad is always stronger than good." For most people, negative thoughts, feelings, and events produce larger and longer-lasting effects than positive ones. For example, research on romantic relationships shows that unless positive interactions outnumber negative interactions by

five to one, chances the relationship will succeed are slim. Similarly, a study that tracked employees' moods over time found that the impact of negative interactions with other co-workers on employees' feelings were five times stronger than their positive interactions.

The upshot, explains Sutton, is that if you're the boss, you can't wait very long to see if these destructive characters will mend their ways. If you see a problem, you need to intervene quickly. And if pointed and immediate feedback fails, do everything you can to expel the bad apple.

### **Serve as a Human Shield**

The best bosses let the workers do their work. They protect their people from red tape, meddlesome executives, nosy visitors, unnecessary meetings, and a host of other insults, intrusions and time wasters. According to Sutton, a good boss actually takes pride in serving as a sort of "human shield" for his staff, absorbing and deflecting heat from superiors and customers. He will gladly do any manner of boring and silly tasks, and battle back against every idiot and slight that makes life unfair or harder than necessary on his or her charges.

Henry Mintzberg's path-breaking research on managerial work showed that a good boss doggedly protects followers from outsiders. He wrote, "Someone once defined a manager, half in jest, as someone who sees the visitors so that everyone else can get the work done."

Of course, good bosses still try their best to cooperate with superiors and do what is best for their organizations as a whole. But they also realize that occasional defiance can be required to protect their people and themselves. Sometimes, upper management may even appreciate and value some occasional defiance. For example, Sutton shares the story of how one-time 3M CEO William McKnight threatened to fire a middle manager named Richard Drew back in the 1920s because his staff were fiddling with pet projects rather than devoting 100 percent of their time to their main jobs. McKnight eventually realized he was wrong when one of those pet projects turned out to be masking tape, which soon became the most successful product in 3M's history. McKnight apologized to Drew and instituted the now-famous "15 percent rule," where employees are encouraged to spend 15 percent of their time on any pet project they want.

## Be Self-Aware

Last but not least, says Sutton, if you are a boss, your success depends on staying in tune with how others think, feel, and react to you. Bosses who persistently promote performance and humanity devote considerable energy to reading and responding to followers' feelings and actions, and those of other key players like superiors, peers, and customers.

“Developing and sustaining self-awareness ought to be at the top of the list for every boss,” writes Sutton. David Dunning, of Cornell University, showed that a hallmark of poor performing bosses is a lack of self awareness. These bad bosses consistently overestimate their skills in just about any task that requires intellectual and social skills, such as debating, having a sense of humor, or interviewing others. In contrast, Dunning found that solid self-awareness is a hallmark of the best performers. These good bosses are especially cognizant of their strengths and weaknesses, and fret about overcoming pitfalls that can undermine their performance.

## Conclusion

Real greatness, according to Sutton, will only come through dogged effort, doing many small things well, getting up after each hard knock, and helping your people press forward at every turn.

“Despite the horseshit spewed out by too many management gurus, there are no magic bullets, instant cures, or easy shortcuts to becoming a great boss,” writes Sutton. “Anyone who tells you otherwise is a liar.” In actual fact, being a good boss takes hard work. And even when things go well for awhile, it's never time to kick-back and rest on our laurels. The best bosses succeed because they never stop chipping away at that bottomless and varied pile of dull, interesting, trivial, fun, and sometimes even ridiculous chores. There's no finish line to be crossed; the rewards only come through the journey itself. Putting one foot in front of the other – and doing one good thing after another – is the one path to becoming a great boss. The good news is: we've already started our journey to becoming better bosses through the knowledge above. Now, let's keep it up.