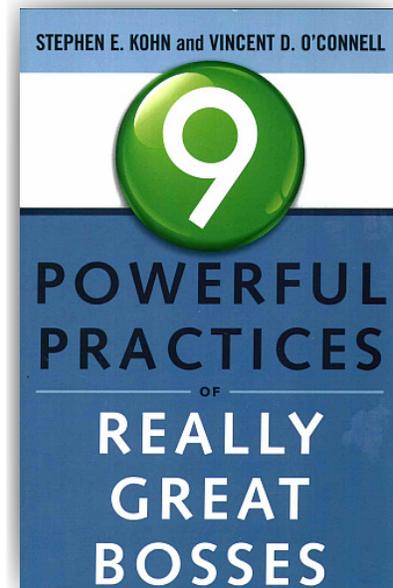




9 Powerful Practices of Really Great Bosses

Stephen E. Kohn and Vincent D. O'Connell

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KEY CONCEPTS

1. *Expanding self-awareness.* By being aware of their strengths and weaknesses and how they are perceived by others, managers have more self-confidence and gain greater control over themselves and their interactions with others.
2. *Practicing empathy.* Managers who understand other people and know how to respond to what other people are experiencing are able to respond effectively to their employees' needs and concerns.
3. *Following the Golden Rule.* Bosses should treat people the way they want to be treated—with respect, fairness, and honesty. Embracing diversity is also an important component of this practice.
4. *Safeguarding credibility.* Managers whose words and actions are in alignment gain the trust of their employees, which is a key step in supervising anyone.
5. *Maintaining proper boundaries.* In the workplace, boundaries involve assigned roles and lines of authority, and they govern how people with different relationships should behave with each other. Managers do not have to be distant or disengaged, but crossing clear boundaries of proper behavior can lead to a loss of credibility and authority.
6. *Criticizing artfully.* Criticism that is not delivered correctly to an employee can make the problem the manager was trying to correct worse. "Artful" criticism motivates the worker to improve and strengthens the relationship between boss and employee.
7. *Adopting a coaching style.* Managers should nurture talent in the organization by mentoring workers and giving them new challenges.
8. *"Flexing" to different people styles.* Personalities in the workplace run the gamut, and empathic managers learn to talk to and build relationships with

all kinds of people, beginning with the assumption that all actions, even those that appear negative, start from a positive intent.

9. *Transforming conflict into opportunity.* While good management skills can prevent some conflict, there will be times when conflict can be healthy. A good manager can help resolve conflict to the organization's benefit by helping everyone understand what is in dispute and where each side stands in the dispute, then helping the sides to reach common ground and acceptable compromises.

INTRODUCTION

Organizations spend little time training managers to develop their people skills, but having the appropriate skills and strategies to manage workers effectively plays a large part in a manager's success. In **9 Powerful Practices of Really Great Bosses**, Stephen E. Kohn and Vincent D. O'Connell outline the nine people management skills that make managers most effective. They arrange the skills in a pyramid, with four human relations skills (self-awareness, empathy, following the Golden Rule, and safeguarding credibility) as the base on which managers can build additional skills. The middle layer consists of the three supervisory skills (observing boundaries, criticizing artfully, and adopting a coaching style). At the top of the pyramid are two capstone skills (flexing to different people styles and transforming conflict into opportunity). The authors offer tips and techniques managers can use to strengthen each skill.

1. EXPANDING SELF-AWARENESS

If knowledge is power, self-knowledge provides a manager with the power to stay in control. When managers are aware of their skills, shortcomings, and otherwise know their emotions, they have more self-confidence and are less likely to act in an impulsive or harmful manner.

To some degree, managers can learn about themselves by listening to their "inner voices." Connecting to emotions and gut feelings has the benefit of enhancing business intuition, making managers more credible leaders who act on their values, and improving their skills at listening to others. The authors offer a variety

of activities managers can undertake to better know themselves, including taking time for contemplation, clarifying values by writing tributes to themselves, studying lessons taken from people they admire, and developing personal credos and testing their actions against them.

However, managers also need to look beyond themselves in developing an accurate self-assessment. They must seek and accept honest feedback constantly, gaining input from a variety of perspectives, including subordinates, peers, and bosses. Feedback can reveal blind spots, or information the manager was not aware of, that can then be assimilated and acted upon.

2. PRACTICING EMPATHY

While self-awareness is a practice requiring a person to look within, empathy requires a manager to become more aware and attuned to the feelings of other people, responding effectively to their unique experiences. Empathy has three components:

1. *Understanding.* To be empathic, managers must understand workers beyond the level of knowing their jobs. For example, managers should understand how each worker adds value to the company and what their training needs are.

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2. *Effective response.* Managers must be able to “read” each situation and respond in a way that fits the individual.
3. *Assessing unique circumstances.* To tailor an appropriate response, managers should sense what an employee is feeling at the moment and understand what values drive the employee.

Empathy is not the same as sympathy. *Sympathy* denotes feeling for someone from the observer's own vantage point; it is emotionally distant. *Empathy* requires emotional connection and understanding from the viewpoint of the person feeling the emotions. When people experience empathy, they feel they have been listened to and understood. A boss can encourage this sense by practicing empathic listening, focusing on what the speaker has to say, and avoiding snap judgments.

To make it a shared communication experience, the manager should:

- Ask open-ended questions, using phrases such as “Explain to me...”

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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- Slow down from the hectic pace of work. This could require the manager to create a specific time for the experience.
- Pay attention to body language.
- Call on personal experiences and observations to help understand the situation.
- Let the story unfold, respecting periods of silence from the speaker.
- Set limits to keep the conversation focused.

Empathic listening emphasizes an interest in fully understanding the other person's circumstances and viewpoints. The idea is to focus first on understanding, before focusing on being understood. It is always important to keep this order of priority in mind, in all of our daily interactions.

3. FOLLOWING THE GOLDEN RULE

Following the Golden Rule requires a manager to use empathy to get into another person's frame of reference, and self-awareness to understand how the manager would feel in those circumstances. In this way, the first three building blocks of Kohn and O'Connell's pyramid urge managers to know themselves, use this self-awareness to understand others, then use that knowledge to act accordingly.

In the business world, the Golden Rule can be broken into four aspects concerning the way people want to be treated:

1. *With respect.* All people should be treated with courtesy and politeness. They should be listened to.
2. *With fairness.* Managers should reflect on the situation from the other person's point of view before making a decision.
3. *With honesty.* Dishonesty destroys the trust of others and can ruin anyone's career.
4. *Embracing diversity.* People from different backgrounds react differently to situations, and managers must be proactive in learning about and understanding different frames of reference.

Having a variety of perspectives among the workforce adds value to an organization, increasing creativity

as people with different points of view see alternative solutions to problems. Recognizing the value of diversity should increase a manager's awareness of the need to be empathic.

4. SAFEGUARDING CREDIBILITY

Credibility is hard to develop and easy to lose. For bosses, credibility comes when their words align with their actions, and when they have the experience and knowledge needed to supervise workers and make the correct decisions. Employees are more likely to trust and follow a manager when they can see the value of the direction they are being given. Supervisors can quickly lose credibility when their values and behaviors do not line up. For example, a boss who talks about the value of mentoring but who actually micromanages employees is likely to lose credibility.

Staff will trust their managers when they have experienced that the words and promises they have heard from their bosses are credible, that is, worthy of them taking the risk to follow the leader's guidance.

There are many things a manager can do to establish or enhance credibility with direct reports. Managers should:

- *Do what they say they will.* This aligns their behavior with their words.
- *Keep their promises.* If they promise something that they then find they will not be able to deliver, managers need to let their employees know as soon as possible and explain why, possibly gaining some credibility for being honest.
- *Remain honest when the truth hurts.* Keeping empathy in mind, managers might want to select appropriate times to deliver painful truths, such as criticism of an employee.
- *Review lessons learned.* At the end of a project, managers can share what they learned in a coaching manner.
- *Align training plans with supervisory direction.* In other words, training should focus on competencies that reflect the values being expressed by the organization. If the organization says quality is

important, training could focus on quality process improvement.

Managers can also build credibility by talking directly about their personal values and organizational values, but those values must be visible in the actions direct reports see their bosses perform on a daily basis.

5. MAINTAINING PROPER BOUNDARIES

To preserve their positions of authority, managers need to maintain proper boundaries with the people they supervise. Healthy boundaries do not mean bosses have to be distant or disengaged, but they cannot be influenced by friendships they have with direct reports. Managers must consider the effects of their decisions in the workplace, remaining fair and avoiding favoritism.

Boundaries govern relational behavior and are based on roles and positions of authority. Some boundaries are always unambiguous, and anyone in a management position should never cross them. The consequences for crossing these boundaries could include loss of credibility and authority in the eyes of employees, negative publicity, and even costly lawsuits. Managers should never:

- Exchange emails or comments of a sexual nature.
- Exchange emails or comments that are derogatory to a race or religion, including using slang or ethnic jokes.
- Be in debt to a subordinate.
- Do anything illegal or immoral around subordinates.
- Be romantically involved with someone they supervise.

Beyond these guidelines, managers may have to use their own judgment. In some workplaces, a boss who is sociable with workers may find the relationship increases productivity or the general atmosphere on the job. In such a case, managers need to keep an eye on whether the closeness with employees affects how they manage their teams and make sure team members understand the need to maintain lines of authority.

A big challenge for new managers occurs when they become the supervisor over people who were once their co-workers. In this case, bosses and employees need to work through their relationships to create new boss/employee relationships. The manager needs to discuss what will need to change in the relationship and set clear role expectations. New managers should expect workers to try to test the limits.

6. CRITICIZING ARTFULLY

Delivering constructive criticism can be one of the least pleasant managerial tasks, as people tend to react negatively when they are criticized. If the criticism is not delivered well, it can result in emotional fallout, such as causing the employee to withdraw from the team, act out, act in a passive-aggressive way, or become demoralized.

Artful criticism, on the other hand, gets the message across in a way that allows the relationship between boss and employee to grow stronger. Such criticism is well-considered, creative, and does not just focus on what the employee is doing wrong. To be artful, criticism must:

- Fit the circumstances.
- Balance feedback with creating motivation for the worker to improve performance.
- Be thoughtful.
- Use empathy.

Artful criticism is hard to pull off in the heat of the moment. That is why every enterprise should have scheduled performance evaluations where the boss can give constructive criticism and outline expected improvements to each employee. At such meetings, the manager should be prepared with documentation of the problem, written company standards of expected work, and examples of good and bad work. The manager should provide the employee with a list of expected changes and set short-term goals to help the worker on the road to improvement.

However, the boss might need to take corrective action outside the scheduled review period. In these situations, the manager needs to maintain self-control; deliver the criticism in private rather than in front of

co-workers; depersonalize the criticism by condemning the deed, not the doer; and choose the best time, usually within 48 hours or before the employee starts a similar project where the mistake could be repeated.

A good way to deliver criticism is to use the “sandwich technique,” where the boss places the criticism between two positive statements about the employee. While practicing artful criticism takes practice, it can result in employees who perform better and trust in their boss’s ability to manage.

It is useful to approach communications with others by assuming that all behavior originates from “positive intent.” Even blatantly negative behaviors can be perceived and understood as originating in some type of positive intent.

7. ADOPTING A COACHING STYLE

There are two classic management styles. *Theory X* assumes that people do not want to work and that managers need to be controlling or threatening to ensure work is performed correctly. *Theory Y* posits the opposite: that people want to work and get the satisfaction of a job well done. The two styles also result in two different work environments. In a *Theory X* workplace, morale is low and workers feel devalued and useless. In a *Theory Y* organization, where talent is nurtured, employees are more productive and have higher morale.

Dr. Abraham Maslow, most famous for his hierarchy of needs, found that the people best suited to be bosses are psychologically healthy and less likely to have a need to exercise power or control over others. Dictatorial bosses are less effective than those who focus on teamwork and mentoring. The authors suggest all managers examine their feelings about exercising power as a self-awareness exercise.

Because the most effective bosses are those who mentor and coach, managers should work on developing their coaching styles. Coaching styles fall into three categories.

1. *Performance coaching* involves helping members of staff do their jobs more effectively by guiding them, not by micromanaging their actions.

2. *Transformational coaching* concentrates on problem areas, such as team member behavior that limits the team's effectiveness. The manager helps the worker learn to approach a task differently.
3. *Developmental coaching* focuses on helping talented employees develop the skills they will need to take a more advanced role in the organization.

The point is that managers will have their hands full leading teams through conflicts that stem from understandable differences between people about how to get from Point A to Point B in performing their assigned roles.

8. "FLEXING" TO DIFFERENT PEOPLE STYLES

Communication in the workplace is complex and multi-dimensional. What is said is not always as important as who said it, how it was said, and what was left unsaid. An empathic, Theory Y manager always keeps this in mind when seeking to build relationships with direct reports. The best attitude is to assume that all actions, even those that appear negative, start from a positive intent. The manager simply has to find that intent.

These positive intents, which reflect the personality orientation of the employee, commonly fall into four categories.

1. *Task oriented.* These employees want to get the job done, and they like communication to be brief and decisive.
2. *Process oriented.* These employees are focused on getting it right. They look at quality and details. Their communication focuses on the value of planning and the awareness of the importance of quality.
3. *Social needs.* These employees value getting along, and their communication focuses on building closeness and developing common interests.
4. *Want appreciation.* These employees seek positive feedback.

The manager needs to be aware of the staff's proclivities. A goal-oriented manager can come off as brusque and humorless when dealing with a team of young employees with high social needs. Such a manager

needs to build the relationship by engaging in some small talk and humor before getting down to business. Focusing on staff needs can result in increased morale and improved performance.

Managers must accept that people cannot change their personality styles, and that to get the best from employees, they must interact with them in ways that suit each individual's style. By adjusting just a few aspects of communication, such as the pace of the conversation, managers can better connect with workers who have specific personality styles, creating a rapport that can result in higher productivity.

9. TRANSFORMING CONFLICT INTO OPPORTUNITY

Effective people management should help avert most conflict in the workplace, but there will be legitimate conflicts that can lead to healthy debates on strategy or decision making. By resolving conflict in a way that allows the team to move toward success, the manager is able to turn conflict into opportunity.

There are two major stages of conflict resolution:

1. *Differentiation Phase*, when the manager helps participants understand the core differences in dispute. Each side should clarify its position so everyone is clear about what the division is. The manager should have each side state what the other side is saying, and have the other side confirm it. As the sides begin to understand the other's position, the distance between them narrows.
2. *Integration Phase*, when the manager helps the sides seek out common ground and areas of agreement so they can reach acceptable compromises.

The basis for transforming conflict into opportunity rests in relationship management and requires many of the skills the authors have emphasized. The manager should treat all the parties in the conflict as valuable assets needed for future work efforts. The boss needs to build a bridge from the conflict to a future that includes all members of the team, collab-

orating for long-term success. The message to team members should be, "We are in this together. How can we fix things to create a better us?"



FEATURES OF THE BOOK

Estimated Reading Time: 6–7 hours, 236 pages

9 Powerful Practices of Really Great Bosses provides managers with a clear outline of relevant people management skills that can make them more effective at work. The book would be of interest to anyone who is in a supervisory position, no matter at what level, and could be helpful to anyone, as these skills are useful in social and family relationships as well as work relationships. The book is designed to be read in order, as later practices build upon those discussed earlier in the book. Stephen E. Kohn and Vincent D. O'Connell provide charts, case examples, self-assessment tools, and exercises managers can use to enhance specific skills. The book includes a glossary, footnotes, and an index.

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