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Unit of One

EDITED BY ANNA MUOIO

BOSS MANAGEMENT

THE BOSS QUESTION IS THE QUESTION MOST FREQUENTLY asked by FAST COMPANY readers—and probably by businesspeople everywhere. “What do I do about my boss? I’m trying to change the way things are done around here, but my boss doesn’t have a clue. Help!” To find some answers to this question of questions, we first tried talking to smart veterans of the boss wars—serious in-the-trenches businesspeople. But they were too smart and too battle-tested to talk, at least by name, about their bosses. We then approached various writers, academics, thinkers, and consultants—men and women who make it their business to answer this boss question. So read their lessons on boss management, and then decide for yourself: What do you do about your boss?

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TRYING TO CONVINCE YOUR BOSS TO SANCTION YOUR BRILLIANT idea or to approve your latest and greatest project? Whatever you do, never use the so-called direct approach: “I have an idea. Let’s do this.” Dilbert would take exactly that approach, because he’s an engineer and totally ignorant of the human condition. But the only way that a boss will respond



“Ask yourself how long you can work for a boss who not only blocks the organization’s progress but also stunts your own growth.”

WARREN BENNIS

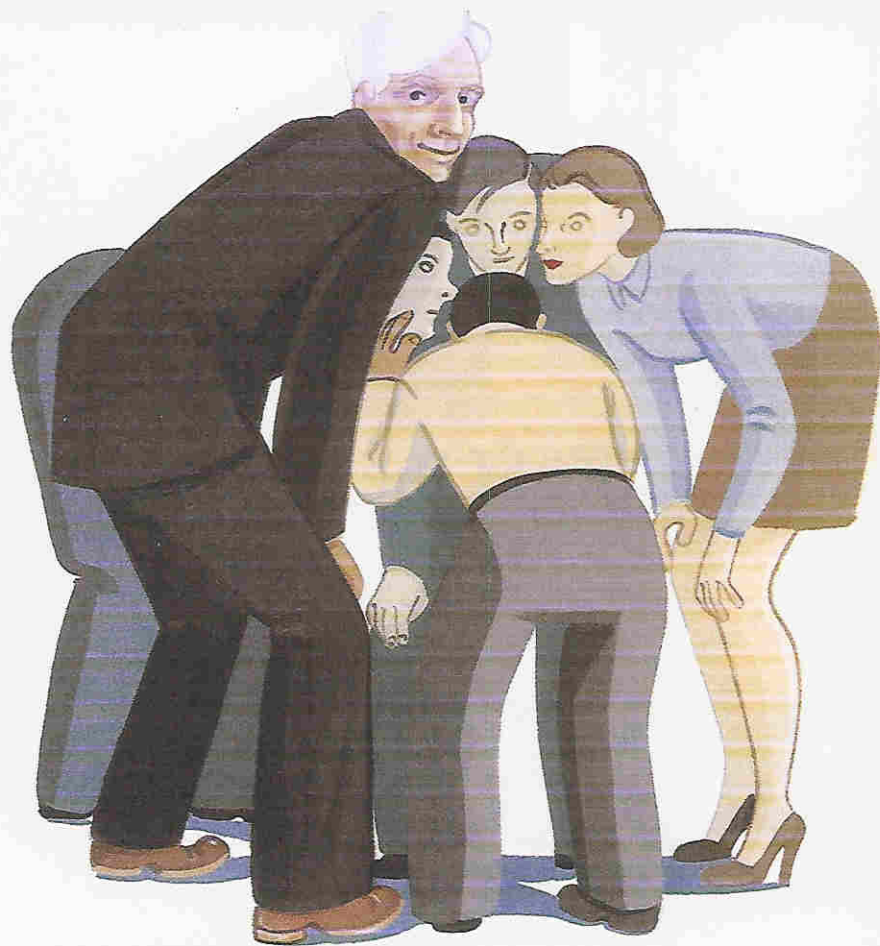
to a reasonable suggestion is unreasonably—like with some of those great-idea-sinker questions: “If this is such a good idea, why isn’t everybody doing it?” Or, “Have you asked everybody in the organization—all 1,000 of them—to buy into your idea?” The worst thing you can do is to assume that your boss is a thoughtful person who will immediately recognize a good idea and take a personal risk to implement it.

Instead, I suggest using the hypnosis approach. Lead your boss to your idea through subtle questioning—giving him the impression that it was his idea in the first place.

But the number-one strategy for managing your boss is to get him focused on other things, so that you can go merrily about your business. To do this, try using the decoy approach. When presenting an idea, make sure that you include one step or item that obviously doesn’t fit—so that your boss will have something to criticize and can feel that he’s provided valuable input. For example, include a slide that lists the items in your four-step plan: (1) Do research. (2) Develop a prototype. (3) Assassinate the archduke of Prussia. (4) Produce the product.

Inevitably, your boss will clamor that *something* doesn’t look right about your presentation. If you’re lucky (you’ve got a one-in-four chance), he’ll focus on step three, assassinating the archduke of Prussia. He’ll demand that you skip that step, and he’ll feel good about his input. Then he’ll give you the green light—and leave you wonderfully alone.

SCOTT ADAMS (WWW.DILBERT.COM) IS THE CREATOR OF “DILBERT,” A CARTOON READ BY MORE THAN 150 MILLION PEOPLE EVERY DAY. ADAMS IS ALSO THE AUTHOR OF 14 BOOKS. DILBERT, ADAMS’S HAPLESS HERO, ALSO HAS AN ANIMATED SERIES ON PRIME-TIME TELEVISION.



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I HAVE FOUR TIPS FOR DEALING WITH A BOSS WHO’S A FIRM BELIEVER IN MAINTAINING THE STATUS quo: First, make sure it’s really your boss who is the horse’s ass—the one resisting change. Second, identify coconspirators, or the people I call “variance sensors,” who really understand the social architecture of a company. Third, work with the healthy part of the organization. When I was president of the University of Cincinnati, I discovered that I spent too much time worrying about those who resisted change. Instead, work with people who want to go forward. And fourth, you’ve got to know when it’s time to walk away. Ask yourself how long you can work for a boss who not only blocks the organization’s progress but also stunts your own growth.

If you’re the leader, you’ve got to give up your omniscient and omnipotent fantasies—that you know and must do everything. Learn how to abandon your ego to the talents of others. There’s a great example of this from 19th-century British history. Two dominant figures of that era were William Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli. Gladstone was a powerful public figure for more than 60 years. It was said that when you had dinner with Gladstone, you thought that you were *with* the most interesting, brilliant, and provocative conversationalist. And it was said that when you dined with Disraeli—an equally charismatic figure—you felt that *you* were the most interesting, brilliant, and provocative conversationalist. If you’re a boss, ask yourself which are you most like—Gladstone or Disraeli? There’s a profound difference.

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