

The best bosses

Why leadership is all about growing healthy relationships **Interviewed by Paul R. Harvey**

Take a moment to remember your favorite boss — the person who most inspired you to be your best. Have you ever examined further the traits you most admired in him or her? Looking past that person's awards and successes, you'll likely uncover a caring leader, skilled in relationship management.

So what creates the foundation for a caring and effective style for leading people to be their best?

"It's all about healthy, successful, effective relationships," says Ann Phillips, senior consulting partner, The Ken Blanchard Companies in San Diego. "And it's our relationships — positive or negative — that determine the outcomes and results we get."

Smart Business recently spoke with Phillips about certain key concepts explained in Ken Blanchard's book, "Whale Done," including "best boss activities" and the three keys to positive relationships.

What is putting even more focus on leadership activities?

According to a 2002 study by The Conference Board, just over half of all workers in the U.S. are satisfied with their jobs, compared to 59 percent back in 1995. So today's leaders have to develop strategies around increasing employee retention and keeping the best talent. We talk a lot about improving service to your team members and customers because employees who feel appreciated and fairly treated take better care of one another and your customers. Ken Blanchard said, 'The one thing your competition can never steal from you is the relationship you have with your people and the relationship they have with your customers.'

What is the basis for a good relationship-building strategy?

There are three keys to positive relationships, including building trust, accentuating the positive and redirecting the energy when mistakes are made. To build trust, your team should perceive that you mean no harm. For this to happen, you need to be visible, with a physical presence. Another key is to make yourself known by sharing some personal experience with your followers and engaging



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them in meaningful dialogue. And you've got to follow up this dialogue by maintaining consistency between your words and your deeds. Finally, the best leaders are always asking themselves, 'How can I help people grow?' You've got to create a framework to educate and train in a scenario that allows risks and encourages experimentation.

Should leaders focus on improving negative behavior or accentuating the positives?

One of the most effective ways to improve negative behavior is to focus on positive behavior. You absolutely need to accentuate the positives, with the mindset of catching people doing things right or at least almost right. You first may need to undo your 'gotcha' history. Do you make time to talk? Do you thoroughly explain the changes you wish to make? And are you patient with yourself and others?

The groundwork for effective praising starts with immediately telling people exactly what they did right or almost right, why you care, and what the impact of their actions was. This also is a great time to ask why they did it and learn their motivation. Finally, encourage them to keep up the good

work and remember that the reward for good work should not be more work.

How should leaders respond to mistakes?

Leaders often struggle with this: How do you redirect the energy when mistakes are made? Discipline should be reserved for 'won't do' behavior, not 'can't do' behavior. Positive consequences and sustainability strategies are important because 85 to 90 percent of what impacts future behavior comes from consequences — what happens after somebody does something. Leaders need to learn that sustaining performance requires learning the effect of four consequences: No response, negative response, positive response and redirection. We find that most leaders focus on the first two, when the biggest impact really comes from the last two.

How is behavior best redirected?

It's important to describe the error or problem as soon as possible — clearly and without blame — and describe to them the negative impact of their actions. If it's appropriate, take the blame for not making the task clear. Go over the task in detail and make sure it is clearly understood, and express your continuing trust and confidence in the person's ability to master the task.

What are proven 'best boss' activities for leading people to be their best?

Try looking back at how you became the leader you are today. Think of a person you believe was your best boss and ask yourself what made that person your best boss. Did he provide tools and resources? Did he praise and recognize? Was she a visionary? Did she challenge you? This person may have had those and many other admirable qualities, but if you look more closely, you will realize he or she genuinely cared about you as a person, not only as an employee. The journey to improving relationships and leading people to be their best may not always be easy, but it will surely be worth it when they look back and remember you as their best boss. <<

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