



Lessons of the Superbosses

By Sydney Finkelstein

If you're transitioning into the role of a leader, an absolute top priority is to build the strongest team you possibly can. Why? Because all great, and successful, leaders know that to succeed you need to surround yourself with the absolute best people you can. And you need to constantly be helping them get better. Capitalizing on the opportunity that a leadership transition gives you to start fresh is the perfect time to raise your game as a leader and as a talent builder.

Timing is important. The old adage that a new leader has

100 days grace before all sorts of stakeholders start raising the pressure level is still true. Realistically, strategy is not going to change in 100 days. Culture is not going to change in 100 days. But the team you put into place, and the steps you take to help make them hyperproductive, is something you can show results on in such a short period. Yes, building and sustaining a world-class team is an ongoing process, but it has to start somewhere, and the right time is when you're handed the keys to your new role.



So how to do that? My research identified three key elements that the world's best leaders incorporate. And they don't just do these things occasionally; instead, they become part of their DNA as leaders. Each of these leaders has been remarkably successful in their chosen business field, yet they were also renowned for the teams they built and the talent they developed. This is not an accident. When you help other people accomplish more than they thought possible, you not only build a personal legacy, but you also build a winning organization.

Right from Day One, the smart leader will move forward on all three fronts, simultaneously. In this article, I first describe, in brief, my research, before digging deep to provide insights on how some of the world's best leaders motivate talent, unleash the creativity of their people, and coach their team members in ways that often run counter to standard HR practice.

This is important. Words like motivation and coaching are not new ones. Yet so much of what passes for good leadership is anything but. How do I know? If you asked a CEO what keeps her up at night, she'd almost certainly say something about the absolute necessity of attracting and retaining world-class talent that can do anything. It turns out that if you asked CEOs the same question ten years ago, or even twenty years ago, you'd get the same answer! Despite all the revolutionary changes that have transformed modern enterprise—supply chain management, smart manufacturing, digital everything, you name it—the one part of an organization that has changed the least is talent and leadership. We're still busy with competency models that all look alike, and we haven't made the changes that are needed when it comes to the lifeblood of every organization—its people.

The failure of old models is reflected in survey after

When you help other people accomplish more than they thought possible, you not only build a personal legacy, but you also build a winning organization.

survey. For example, PwC's 17th annual global CEO survey in 2013 found that an incredible 93 percent of surveyed CEOs were changing, or planned to change, their talent strategies. At the same time, there was significant dissatisfaction with HR; only one-third of surveyed CEOs said that HR was well prepared to meet this challenge.

Surely, it's time to consider some new ideas. The good news is that if we know where to look, there are some truly remarkable examples of genius HR practices at work from which we can learn. Ten years ago I set out to find these "superbosses", study what they did that was different from so many other leaders, and decode their methods so that any leader, any manager, any boss, can get better at the one essential task they all share: developing world-class talent that can adapt and adjust, learn to get better at whatever they do, and in the final analysis, create value for themselves and their organizations.

I compiled, dissected, and analyzed stories about the lives and careers of 18 primary superbosses in fields as diverse as casual dining (Norman Brinker), hospitals (Tommy Frist), comic books (Stan Lee), nonprofit endowment investment (David Swensen), filmmaking (Roger Corman), hedge funds (Julian Robertson), newspapers (Gene Roberts), and special effects (George Lucas), among others.

Looking for recurring themes and patterns, I discovered that superbosses differ considerably in their inter-

personal styles, but that the ways in which they identify, motivate, coach, and leverage others are remarkably consistent, highly unconventional, and unmistakably powerful. Superbosses aren't like most bosses; they follow a playbook all their own.

Be a Super-Motivator

Superbosses are super-motivators during a transition, and after. They help other people accomplish more than they ever thought possible.

Superbosses create attachments to their people that engender tremendous loyalty and effort. It's almost like a "Stockholm syndrome of leadership": Employees push themselves to their limits for their superbosses, but rather than resent the superboss for it, they feel even greater loyalty. They'll do anything to keep from disappointing their superboss and they yearn to please him or her, not only because they've completely bought into the boss's vision but also because they want to feel that their boss was correct in selecting them for the job.

Ron Marston, who worked with HCA CEO and superboss Tommy Frist for years before becoming CEO of Health Care

Despite all the revolutionary changes that have transformed modern enterprise . . . the one part of an organization that has changed the least is talent and leadership.

Corporation of America (HCCA), told me in an interview, "You never wanted to let Tommy down. If you did, you were harder on yourself not because of anything he did or said but because you knew you failed to live up to his standards."

Think for a moment how powerful this kind of motivation is. Many companies today measure how engaged or emotionally connected members of their workforce are. In all too many companies, engagement is disappointingly low. For superbosses, engagement is the least of it. They know that to succeed they need the world's best team, which doesn't mean engaged talent; it means energized, super-charged talent.

So how do superbosses do it? The first thing to know is that all superbosses drive their people exceptionally hard. "Everybody knew that Bill demanded results," said Ronald Blankenship, president and CEO of the Verde Group and longtime associate of superboss real estate mogul Bill Sanders, "and if you were going to work with him, you need to be prepared to make that the primary focus in your life." Comedian Andy Samberg remembers that after working for superboss Lorne Michaels at *Saturday Night Live*, acting in movies was a "cakewalk." "The pressure doesn't really seem that high. You've dealt with this thing that's *SNL*, which is just this crazy, intense, beautiful pressure cooker."

In setting ever higher expectations, superbosses aren't bound by last year's figures or by a sense of what "normal" performance would be for an employee in a given position. They're certainly not bound by what *employees* conceive as their natural limitations. Superbosses want to see how far people can go. They treat staff like Olympic athletes, pushing them to the limit and beyond. As Lee Clow, now chairman of TBWA/Media Arts Lab, put it, Jay Chiat (cofounder of the advertising agency Chiat/Day) was "always demanding of everyone to do something better than they very often knew or thought they could or were capable of."

Isn't all this hard-charging, whip-cracking pressure ultimately counterproductive? Some employees at superboss-led companies do drop out, but those that remain respond to the constant and continually expanding intensity by developing an even deeper emotional bond with the superboss. That's because even though superbosses keep the pressure up, they also inspire performance, emboldening employees to push themselves up. Superbosses "get" that individuals—even the most driven and talented—accomplish so much more when high expectations come with a message of *possibility*. They understand that people will work their hardest to become bigger, better, tougher, more resourceful, and more creative when they first see themselves as these things. And they sense that it is their paramount job as leaders to inject a strong and unforgettable sense of possibility in their workforce.

Superbosses are geniuses at motivation. Unlike some bosses, they don't want 80 percent of the attention and dedication of their people. They want 100 percent. And they *get* 100 percent. People know when they're working for a special boss—someone who is changing the rules, is unafraid to take risks, deeply cares about achieving a higher objective, and invites employees to be a part of it. When a boss like that is giving orders or, as is more often the case, pushing and inspiring you in a powerful way, you don't perceive the pressure to perform as tedious or unwelcome. You perceive it as part of a gigantic, unbelievably important and exciting mission. You thrive on this pressure. And, just like your boss, you lose yourself in the mission.

It is the superboss's combination of lofty expectations and aspirations, then, that enables the exceptional people under their wings to do impossible things. An upward spiral of performance takes root among protégés of superbosses: As they become accustomed to surviving and thriving in an intense environment, their ambitions only increase. They become so addicted to success that they seek out ever more challenging assignments. And they feel so great upon meeting or exceeding the superboss's expectations that they want to do it again and again. They yearn to be *even closer* to the superboss, his inspiration, his energy, and they will do whatever it takes to stay in his orbit. It's a cyclone of pressure, success, acknowledgment, rising confidence, and even more success that makes the protégé, the superboss, and the superboss's organization utterly unstoppable. An employee of Jay Chiat summed it up well: "He left something in people that makes it hard for you to go back to being ordinary. Once you feel it, you can't change it."

Nuture Openness

Superbosses unleash the creativity of their team members to create a constantly adapting organization.

It's one thing to motivate your people to do great things, it's quite another to unleash their potential for innovation. Yet when you look closely at what superbosses actually do, a clear pattern emerges from which every leader, every manager, and every employee can learn. There are three distinct kinds of action superbosses take to nurture openness and innovation in their people. First, superbosses encourage constant risk taking and rule breaking. Kyle Craig, former chairman and CEO of Steak and Ale, remembered that his superboss Norman Brinker "would challenge you. He would say: 'What do you think you could do there? What is working? Go try something.' It was very empowering because it gave you a license to say, 'We *can* do some things differently!'"

The second way superbosses nurture openness is by removing anxieties that get in the way of people doing new things. If you analyze why individuals in your workplace just don't seem to come up with anything new, I bet you'll find that fear of failure plays an outsize role. This isn't such an irrational fear, either; in many companies, failure is a dirty word. Mess

up and you get labeled as unreliable, incompetent, or worse. Superbosses, of course, don't think about failure the way most people do. Rather, they are masters at reframing failure as an opportunity in disguise. By implication, they don't *fear* failure, but instead view it as just a step you sometimes end up taking on the way to success.

Another way superbosses help protégés overcome any reluctance to innovate is by creating new opportunities for them to contribute. Hedge-fund impresario Julian Robertson would sit in the middle of his company's large workroom and loudly debate ideas his analysts presented. Not every analyst who volunteered an idea got a pat on the back; when Robertson thought an idea was dumb, he would say so, according to one former associate: "He would say things like: 'You say this company has got some great product, and I just called so-and-so and he said the product is just terrible.'" Employees understood that unfettered debate was simply Robertson's style, that he deeply appreciated new ideas, and that they didn't need to fear pushback from him. Robertson's office became what so many offices today aren't: a safe space for fresh thinking and experimentation.

A third way superbosses nurture openness and innovation is by encouraging their employees or associates to never, ever rest on their laurels. Miles Davis, in the book *Miles: The Autobiography of Miles Davis*, said, "To be and stay a great musician, you've got to always be open to what's new, what's happening at the moment. You have to be able to absorb it if you're going to continue to grow and communicate your music." Time and again, I found that superbosses were consummate cool hunters—always on the prowl for the next great product idea, the next great trend, the next great person to hire. Speaking of *Saturday Night Live*, comedian and SNL alum Conan O'Brien told writers Tom Shales and James Andrew Miller in their book *Live From New York* that "you always get the sense that the show is almost like a shark that's constantly on a mission to find what's new, what's hot, what are people into now? And chomp its teeth into it."

A superboss's cool hunting can take any number of forms. Norman Brinker was so good at anticipating emerging restaurant industry trends because he was constantly probing the minds of consumers. Not content to peruse the usual market research reports, Brinker would spend hours in his restaurants, talking to customers and staff, developing a reputation in the industry for his approachability and willingness to learn.

Employees of superbosses get swept up in a whirlwind of constant innovation. They energize people around them to inject creativity into their work each and every day. The result is not merely great wealth and



influence for the superboss; it's a lifetime of career success for those lucky enough to become his protégés.

Use the Apprenticeship Development Model

Superbosses resurrect the apprenticeship model of employee development right from the start of their tenure.

So much of how people learn in the workplace today, from 360-degree performance evaluations to mentoring to coaching, has become bureaucratized and impersonal. Most competent bosses today generally don't prioritize engaging reports informally in an immersive learning experience. Aiming for more certainty and clarity in their organizations, they promulgate rules and establish bureaucracies that distance them from employees. They also choreograph their days to assure that work gets done, leaving very little unstructured time for instructing or coaching. They certainly don't use the word *apprentice* very much. The very concept seems quaint, the product of a bygone age.

Superbosses embrace the apprenticeship model wholeheartedly as a way of doing business. When they hire, they *know* they are giving an employee a chance to learn a craft at their feet. Staying in the trenches with protégés and serving as something akin to a player-coach, superbosses use this informal manner of instruction not only to convey knowledge but to also exert a powerful, almost parental influence on their protégés.

The most basic and critical set of practices underlying the apprenticeship model concerns simply being there with employees, getting to know them, and letting them in. You can't develop a personal approach to training staff if you aren't there in person (or, if necessary, via communications technology), day in and day out. Yet most bosses don't do this—in fact, they don't even come close. The CEOs appearing on the hit television show *Undercover Boss* are, sadly, not all that unusual. Imagine resorting to impersonating low-level employees to find out what's really going on in your own company. These clueless, distanced bosses are the complete antithesis of the superboss. Whereas many businesses today focus on getting closer to the customer, superbosses are very much focused on getting closer to their employees or team members.

Tommy Frist, who was also a pilot, would sometimes fly his protégés to events in other cities, letting them sit in the copilot's seat and talking business with them. The world-renowned conducting teacher Jorma Panula would spend all day with his students, and then he would invite them to a restaurant to talk even more. The *Philadelphia Inquirer's* Gene Roberts was known to stay up until two in the morning talking to staffers—at his home.

In the corporate world, employees who seek to speak with their bosses normally attempt to “book time.” They might send an email to an assistant, and the resulting “meeting” occurs outside of the “actual work” being done. Such practices seem to bring bosses and employees closer together, but in reality they distance and control the degree of contact bosses have with staff. While today's hyperscheduled executives obviously need to control their time, we often forget about what we lose when we run from event to event—the casual, ongoing contact *in the moment* that is essential for learning,

serendipity, and building meaningful relationships.

Protégés of all superbosses related similar powerful, career-shaping lessons they learned during the course of informal, apprentice-style interactions. Superbosses deliver multiple layers of lessons at once. First, they teach technical nuances about their business—insights employees can't get anywhere else, as well as memorable reminders of the fundamentals that protégés are already expected to know. If you want to learn the finer points of running a newspaper, who better to teach you than Gene Roberts? If you want to learn the secrets of starting a successful restaurant chain, who better than Norman Brinker?

Just as valuable is a second layer of lessons, the make-or-break advice superbosses impart on how to run businesses and lead organizations. Billionaire entrepreneur and designer Tory Burch credits Ralph Lauren with teaching her “the importance of having a complete vision for a company, from product to marketing to store visuals.” Alice Waters taught Gayle Ortiz, now chef and owner of Gayle's Bakery in San Francisco, how to “pay attention to detail and demand perfection” in all aspects of a restaurant's operation, a lesson that became “my main focus of the way that I looked at business.”

Finally, on a day-to-day basis, superbosses also customize their general teaching style to fit the individual. “He didn't react the same way to everyone,” saxophonist Bill Evans said of Miles Davis. “Everyone was different and personal to him, and that is one of the things that he was able to do ... get to know each person and what each person needed. Some people he would be harder on than others. He was interesting in that way.” Of Julian Robertson, hedge fund executive Chase Coleman said, “He was very good at understanding some combination of what motivated people and how to extract maximum performance out of people. For some people, that was encouraging them, and for other people, it was making them feel less comfortable.”

What Superbosses Do Differently

Transitioning into a new leadership position is a big deal, and you want to get it right. Superbosses do something that every leader needs to do: They help other people accomplish more than they ever thought possible. It gets back to one of the best definitions of leadership I have ever heard: Leaders are people who create other leaders. In a world of constant change, driven by globalization, technology, and economic and geopolitical shocks that seem to happen on a regular basis, the need for world-class leadership has never been greater. The best news of all is that the superboss playbook can be learned, and disseminated, by any individual leader and in any organization, as long as they are willing to invest the time and energy to make it happen. 🧩

Sydney Finkelstein, Ph.D., is the Steven Roth Professor of Management and Director of the Leadership Center at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College. His latest book is *Superbosses: How Exceptional Leaders Manage the Flow of Talent* (Portfolio/Penguin, 2016). He may be reached at Sydney.Finkelstein@tuck.dartmouth.edu.

Lee Hecht Harrison has been awarded the prestigious ALM Vanguard™ rating for 2016.

We're proud to be recognized as a top leadership development firm.

It's good news for us. Great news for your people. According to ALM Intelligence (formerly Kennedy Research Consulting & Advisory), we've advanced the breadth and depth of our Leadership Development services, and we're strong in every major market around the world. What can the global leader in talent development and transition do for you? Visit LHH.com to find out.

**LEE HECHT
HARRISON**

