Resources for Managers

Forget those fancy theories about improving corporate performance. It all boils down to excellent supervision, says author Jeffrey Fox. “Great bosses position the organization to succeed, not with policies, but with posture and presence,” explains Fox in *How to Become a Great Boss* (Hyperion, 2002). Fox interviewed dozens of business leaders, focusing on the kind of bosses that inspired them on their rise to the top. The result is what he calls “The Great Boss Simple Success Formula.” Great bosses, he writes:

- Hire only top-notch talent.
- Weed out people who don’t fit in with the organization or with their job.
- Tell their workers what needs to be done—and why.
- Leave the job up to the people they have chosen to do it.
- Train their workers.
- Listen to their workers.
- Remove any barriers fettering their workers.
- Track the progress of their workers.
- Publicly and privately acknowledge workers who do a good job.

The rise of knowledge-based workers has created a management dilemma: How do you supervise individuals whose jobs demand they demonstrate qualities of creativity and autonomy—and who also hate to be managed? It’s not easy, say Patrick McKenna and David Maister in *First Among Equals* (Free Press, 2002). Because of the complexities of overseeing knowledge workers, many go unsupervised. That’s a recipe for disaster, the writers say. McKenna and Maister say supervisors of other professionals take on four key responsibilities:

- Clarifying, understanding and communicating their role as group leaders.
- Coaching and guiding team members.
- Managing colleagues as a group.
- Building for the future while monitoring their group’s success.

McKenna and Maister acknowledge that managing other professionals requires managerial skill, diplomacy and a lot of patience. However, they conclude, “By accepting the responsibility to affect the performance of those around you, you have a chance to make a difference and to leave a legacy.”

“You can’t choose your boss,” says *Fortune* magazine columnist Stanley Bing in *Throwing the Elephant* (Harper Business, 2002). But you can mold the one you have into someone you can tolerate. That’s how you “throw the elephant.” Bing turns to Zen Buddhism, adapting its sacred principles to boss/employee interactions, and identifies four truths that underlie professional life:

- Work is suffering. “The ability to boss other people around destroys much of human decency,” Bing says.

- Desire is at the root of suffering.
- Suffering can be conquered.
- There is a path to end suffering.

So how do you get to that point? First, you discover how to handle the elephant, then how to manage it, then finally how to toss it. “That you are willing and able to do actual work gives you incredible power over a creature that by no means wishes to ... do any,” writes Bing.

Equilibrium is essential to the elephant’s survival, says Bing. You control small matters that can easily destabilize the elephant, which enables you to control the elephant.

Bing concludes *Throwing the Elephant* with a chapter titled “Finding the Elephant in You.” Adopting the tone of a self-help guru, he counsels readers on how to think of themselves in the boss/employee continuum: “Elephant? Or human? You can’t be both. The choice is in your hands. ... Think about it. Or better yet sit down and don’t think at all.”

Leadership isn’t about volume, says author Joseph Badaracco, Jr. In *Leading Quietly* (Harvard Business School Press, 2002), he says that the most valued leaders are those who lead by example in times of crisis and ethical uncertainty. To better understand the dynamics of quiet leadership, Badaracco, a professor of business at Harvard University, conducted a four-year study and identified three common personality traits among effective quiet leaders:

- Restraint. Because quiet leaders possess the discipline to move deliberately, they avoid mistakes, understand nuances and can provide the nudge organizations need to move in the right direction.
- Modesty. Quiet leaders don’t perceive themselves as changing the world, writes Badaracco. Rather, he says, “they know that their will, ideals and ability are only a few of the many forces that shape what may or may not happen.”
- Tenacity. Despite the fact that quiet leaders may be perceived as pragmatic, they commonly possess a sense of urgency and determination to get things done.

Quiet leaders also view situations realistically, take deliberate action and invest political capital wisely. When they take action on a difficult problem, they pay close attention to how much of it they are risking and the likely returns on their investment.