

**BOSS STREET SE1**

**LONDON BOROUGH OF SOUTHWARK**

# Who's the Boss?

By Michael Harbridge

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**M**ost new business owners look forward to all the perks of being the boss. You get to set your own hours, work when you want, hire others to do the work you don't want to do, and simply be the one to make all the decisions and be in charge.

It's no wonder everyone wants to be the boss! And what's the scariest thing for new shop owners? The exact same things they saw as perks! And the most frustrating part of being a studio owner? *The exact same things!* Most studio owners quickly realize that setting your own hours means working many, many hours. Hiring may not be as easy as it seems, and managing employees can be a real challenge.

I opened my first ceramics studio a month after I graduated from high school. I had little training and was hiring people more than twice my age. I knew nothing about dealing with all the personalities, conflicts, and issues I would soon encounter with staff. Along the way, I had ideal employees and not-so-perfect team members. As the business grew, so did the number of staff members and the joys that came along with it. Setting my own hours meant I worked *my* planned schedule, plus all the hours left over when

staff got sick, needed time off, or simply stopped showing up for work.

I eventually got frustrated dealing with everything and decided to hire a manager who could deal with the staff while I focused on other aspects of business growth. I told the new manager that her focus needed to be figuring out why our production levels had not increased at the rates they should since we had hired more staff. I expressed my frustration with turnover and asked her to figure out what the problem was and fix it. She had free rein to hire or fire as needed.

After a week, my manager came to me and said she'd figured out the problem and had a solution. I said, "Great, let's sit down, discuss, and figure this out!"

She seemed nervous and was having a hard time getting the words out. As she started to talk, she slid her store key to the center of my desk and said, "I'm going to put this here in case you decide you want it after I tell you what I've discovered." Her next words were devastating.

"The problem is you! "You are the biggest jerk to your employees! You never give them credit for anything they do right; all you ever do is make them feel

worthless for their mistakes.” She continued along the same lines — she’d documented many examples and, one by one, explained each of them to me.

As I listened, at first I was angry, thinking, “Who the heck does she think she is? The nerve of her to say these things to me!” But with every example she offered, I came to realize I was the jerk she was describing.

Many of my employees hated me and most feared me. The lack of quality production was a direct result of me coming into the production area and picking out the few less-than-perfect castings from hundreds of perfect creations. The mere sound of me coming would cause staff to panic, often wrecking anything they were working on at the time. Their morale was so low that many stopped caring because they figured it didn’t matter whether or not they did a good job — I was only going to see the items that were not perfect.

I sat back and took it all in. This manager was a former customer — before she came to work for me, she’d only seen the wonderful, caring side of me when I was dealing with customers. She never saw the evil, mean side of me that, without my realizing it, would take out all my frustrations on my staff. I had to be nice to the customers because they were spending money.

Without them, I would not be in business. We always had a saying, “The customer is always right, no matter how wrong they are!” So after I had to smooch the behind of a customer I wanted to kick in the behind, I’d let off steam in other ways — most of the time on my employees. They worked for me, so I didn’t have to be really nice to them. Or did I?

I slid the key back to my manager as we both sat in tears. I asked her to stay and help me become a boss my staff would respect and like to work for. It was a lot of work, and several times she caught me slipping back into bad old habits, but eventually I became a pleasant person to work for. At times, we even had fun!

Do you have high turnover? Is your staff happy working for you? Do they care about your business and treat it as if it were their own? Do they go the extra mile to be helpful to you, your customers, and other staff? Have you had employees stop showing up for work without notice or a phone call? I’ve even heard of employees texting to quit on the spot. If it seems like you need a revolving door for your staff, unmotivated workers, or other serious employee issues, you may want to first take a look in the mirror. Is it you?

**What’s the scariest thing for new shop owners? The exact same things they saw as perks! And the most frustrating part of being a studio owner? *The exact same things!***



# REALLY?

**You didn't notice the trash can overflowing under the counter, the dirty sink at the wash-up area, or the other million things that could be done? But you found time to color in your Hello Kitty coloring book?**

Every business owner will someday need to deal with an employee who is lazy, doesn't care, and — no matter how hard you try — just doesn't get it. It happens. But if this is a pattern, then you may have to look first at who you are hiring and how you complete the process. If new staff members start out enthusiastic but quickly decline, it could be a result of the work atmosphere.

## Set your expectations

Welcome each new employee and set out clear guidelines from day one. I always told new staff members right from the start that I am your boss, not a friend you will be hanging out with outside of work hours. I will respect you as long as you respect me. If I can't trust you, you won't be working for me. And then I would explain.

I can't become too involved in the personal lives of employees and form great friendships where we become best buds because it makes it that much harder to make needed corrections if the time comes. Don't take it personally. I do want to know about your family, your life, what you like to do — but don't count on me to come to your children's birthday parties or go out partying on the weekends. I'm your boss, and there is a line I have to draw and not become too emotionally attached. Please understand and respect that.

This is not to say we may not go out to dinner or do fun things as a group. At times, such activities may also involve spouses and partners. Laying this out right from the start helped prevent hurt feelings later on. And when staff tried to cross the line between boss and friend, I could easily remind them of this conversation.

Respect and trust go a long way with me. If you don't or can't respect me and my business, you will not work out. I've worked very hard to build this business into what it is, and this is my livelihood. This is not always a fun job for me. I have all the pressure of paying the bills, making sure my staff gets paid — and at times there is no money left to pay me. So I will do my best not to take my frustrations out on you. Please respect the fact that everything is on my shoulders. I need my staff to do everything they can to help make the business succeed. When you are punched in, you are working for me. You're not on the phone with friends, goofing off, or sitting around. There is always something to do. I keep and reward those who

do their job and take the extra steps required to make a great work environment.

I also made it very clear I would not expect my staff to do anything I would not do. We were a team, and everyone was cross trained to do everything. This way I never got, "That's not my job." Each person had specialties, sure, but when someone got sick or something came up, we could all do each other's jobs. I didn't always pawn off cleaning the restrooms or sweeping the floor on my employees. I did it when needed. I never wanted to put my staff "beneath" me or act like I was special and didn't have to do those things. And I recall many times going into the restrooms to plunge toilets and clean up messes.

I didn't like it, and it would have been a whole lot easier to pawn it off on someone else. But this is respect. At times when I was busy, I had no problem asking staff to do those nasty things. While they weren't crazy about doing them either, they knew they needed to get done. And there were times I can recall an employee stopping me, saying, "I'll get it this time. You did that the other day and it's my turn." Really? You're offering to plunge an overflowing toilet because someone decided to try to flush down half a roll of toilet paper? Respect goes both ways. And remember, respect is something you earn. I'll say that again — respect if something you earn. It goes both ways.

Please show up for work on time. I need to trust you will be here. And if something happens or you don't feel well, please call as soon as you can so other arrangements can be made. Don't take advantage of me. If you want time off, please give me advance notice. Look at the schedule and see if you can trade hours with other staff before coming to me. I'd rather you have a solution because it makes it that much easier for me to approve.

If you can't work it out with another team member, it's probably going to result in me working more hours — in most instances, I'm OK with that. But also respect the fact I have a life outside this business and can't work 24 hours a day. I will do the best I can to accommodate schedule changes, but at times it will not work out. You being flexible (to a point) with staff and covering for them when needed will build the mutual respect needed to make them willing to help you out in a pinch.

Do what needs to be done. There are times when it is crazy busy and you will get behind. But there will also be times when you have nothing immediate to do. Please don't sit around. There are always tasks to be completed — organizing to be done, trash to be emptied, dusting, or a million other things. I always had a list of things to do when employees had nothing else. I always told them I did not want to hear there was nothing to do. There is always something to do — but have a list for them to follow. Not everyone has the initiative to figure it out.

I recall one time finding an employee coloring in a coloring book. First, I was baffled as to where the coloring book and crayons came from. So I asked. The 22-year-old told me she brought them from home so she would have something to do. Really? You didn't notice the trash can overflowing under the counter, the dirty sink at the wash-up area, or the other million things that could be done? But you found time to color in your Hello Kitty coloring book? Remember when I mentioned earlier that you may get an employee that doesn't get it? This was one of them, and because she was so offended I expected her to work for me when I was paying her, she did not show up for work the next day. She was mad I would not let her color! Buh-bye!

Treat customers with respect. That goes back to the customer is always right, no matter how wrong they are. At times customers were way out of line, demanding and downright nasty. But you always had to do your best to win them over and be kind. And if you can't do that, get someone who can. Let's face it, some customers push your buttons to the point you want to kick them right out the door. So if you need help or feel like you are being taken advantage of, ask for help from another staff member or me. After all, I own the place, and sometimes I have to deal with these situations.

Most of the time, I'd try to kill them with kindness, but at times my sarcasm would kick in. The customer may not have realized it was sarcasm, but my staff nearly always knew. I also had strict rules about discussing difficult customers in front of other clients. Our loading dock was often a great spot after a difficult situation. We saved damaged goods to smash in the dumpster on special occasions, and wads of waste clay were also therapeutic. It's okay to blow off steam — just not where a customer can see or hear.

Looking back, I remember several occasions before I became the "good boss" where I lost it with customers who I thought were being unreasonable. To this day, I believe they were out of line, but in several cases, my reaction only made the situation worse. And many times it was over something insignificant, and I lost customers as a result.

There is a fine line between sticking to your policy or your principles and just being stupid. There is also a fine line between being reasonably accommodating and letting someone take advantage. So when you

find yourself in a tricky situation, step back for a second and evaluate. Is it worth losing the customer over a couple of dollars?

Let me give you an example I recently saw discussed online where I think things got way out of hand. A customer created a shape in a studio, and when it was fired, the item shivered. It wasn't the customer's or the studio owner's fault, but ultimately it fell on the studio owner to make it right. So she did the right thing and told the customer to come back in when it was convenient and make a new one.

It was a long time before the customer came back to make the replacement. When she did, she decided to do a different shape, but at the same price. Not a problem. The customer could have thrown a fit about the inconvenience of having to come and paint another shape, but didn't. Some customers would have demanded compensation for their time, but she didn't. Where this customer stepped over the line was when she decided to buy and paint an additional item. I know — you're probably asking why this was a problem.

Well, when the store employee wrote up her bill for the extra item, she included the normal studio fee. The customer took issue with having to pay a studio fee, since she had to come in to redo the item that hadn't



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turned out. The employee did what she thought was right and removed the studio fee. The customer left and was happy. She also spent more money, so clearly she held no grudge at the fact her first item didn't turn out and potentially would return in the future. So it all sounds good, right?

Here is where things went tragically wrong. The studio owner found out and called the customer to tell her she owed for the studio fee. This was both a slap in the face to the staff member and not a good thing at all to do to the customer. Now the customer plans to never visit the studio again and will probably tell her friends, resulting in more potential lost business. I'm not certain what the studio fee was, but I'm suspecting around \$5. When I saw this post, I tried to point out to the studio owner that she should take a step back and evaluate what she had done. After several exchanges, with comments from people on both sides of the discussion, the studio owner basically told off me and others who'd agreed with me.

Within the text exchanges, I could see the points the studio owner was making of sticking to her policy. However, I tried to point out, this customer was inconvenienced (not her fault the item shivered) and came in without demanding anything for her time, redid the item, and spent more money in the studio. And now she's probably gone forever because of a studio fee. Was it worth sticking to the studio policy and not taking everything into consideration?

My feeling is you have to stand by your staff decisions, right or wrong. You can't call a customer and tell them they have to pay more because you felt an employee made an error. You hired and trained them. If they make a \$5 mistake, eat it! Learn from it and explain how to handle it if it happens again. Don't call the customer and take it out on them.

The studio owner tried to justify her actions by saying it had been an extended period of time from when the first item shivered to when the customer came in to redo it, so she was not that good of a customer anyway if she had not been in to paint in months. This tells me the customer was busy and really didn't have time to come in and redo the item,

but when she did, she spent more money.

So how would I have handled this situation if it were my studio? I would have probably offered the customer a \$10 gift certificate to use on something else when the original item didn't turn out. That would have been my standard policy as an apology. Chances are, she would have picked out something with a higher dollar value, and if not, oh well. And I would have never charged her a studio fee. What did the certificate and studio fee really cost me? Perhaps a couple of bucks, but in the end, I would have a happy customer.

If I really felt the customer should have paid the studio fee after an employee threw it in, I would talk to the staff member and explain the reason I felt it was an error. Then I would assure her that it was fine, because she did what she thought made a positive experience without giving away the shop. Even if I felt the customer was wrong to ask for the fee to be waived, I would never have called her to tell her to pay. I probably would have waited for her to come in and explain it's

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not normally our policy to waive the fee, but we did it that one time, and I hope she will come back in again soon — and thank her for her business.

Sometimes as a studio owner, you get caught up in everything you have to deal with, especially the pressure of paying all the bills. At times it may seem like little things your staff and customers do are sending you into a financial crisis. Is one \$5 charge going to make or break your business? It's so easy for someone like me, looking at it from the outside now, to say I'd have handled this encounter in a different way.

I really feel for the studio owner, because I understand the pressures and frustrations studio owners all face on a daily basis. I was there at one time. I did similar things, and looking back, I could kick myself for not stepping back and looking at the big picture. Before you pick up a phone or reverse an employee's decision, take a moment to think over the whole situation and consider how your actions will affect you in the long run.

## Keep your staff happy

Far too often, we think the only thing that drives employees is financial compensation. Money certainly does go a long way toward making most people productive. But how many people make a lot of money at jobs they hate? Most studio owners don't have unlimited cash, so you need to be creative in giving employees additional incentives. Being a respectful boss rather than a cranky, fearful boss is a great start. But what about incentives that motivate staff *and* put more money in your pocket? Here are a couple of ideas:

**Up selling.** Pointing out useful additional items or small add-ons to customers can have a big impact on the bottom line. Have a weekly contest for your staff — whoever sells the most that week gets a \$20 studio credit. What does that credit really cost you? Or make the prize for the entire staff — if we sell a certain (obtainable) amount of add-ons (or whatever you choose that week) *everyone* gets something. Or maybe we order pizzas for a small after-hours staff party on Saturday. You can do small things that don't cost a lot of money, but make it fun to work in your studio. If you can't get the entire staff together for a pizza party, give each one a \$10 gift card instead. If they can generate hundreds more in sales, what's \$50 or \$100 in gift cards really costing you?

**Clean-up goals.** Challenge your staff to get the studio cleaned and set up for the next day without staying past a certain time at night. If they meet this goal all week, they get something special. This is designed to get them motivated to work hard on cleaning up so they can clock out sooner, costing you less payroll. It also makes the person opening the next morning happy because the brushes, sink, and studio are clean and ready to go. How often have you heard, "It was so busy we didn't have time last night." Then you look at sales and see only two people were in the studio. Really? No time to clean up, or you had to stay two hours after closing?

Most importantly, make your staff feel appreciated. Tell them when they are doing a good job. Don't just point out when something is done incorrectly. And when something is not done right, handle it in a professional way.

Give responsibility. Let go and let others take on more. It's tough to do, but little by little, tell them they are doing such a good job, you are willing to have them help out because you trust and respect them. This also lessens your workload so you can focus on growing the business. Remember, respect and responsibility are earned. Most people like a new challenge and like to feel appreciated.

Think about the time you spend training new staff. This is an investment of your time and money. When you have to train someone new because a person leaves or is let go, it's costing you valuable time and revenue. Every little thing you can do to keep people

happy and productive benefits you in multiple ways. How much time and frustration have you endured in the past year training new staff?

I always have to laugh when I see posts and conversations about staff not doing what they are supposed to be doing or texting instead of working. "Should I tell my staff they are not allowed to text when at work?" Really? Who is the studio owner and boss here? You have every right! Set the rules right from the start. No calls and no texting while working unless it's an emergency, and in that case they can call the studio. Leave your phone in the car.

It may sound foolish to have an employee handbook for a store employing only a few people. But it's an excellent idea. Regardless of the number of employees, put your rules in writing. Update it as needed and give a copy to each employee and have them sign a form stating they've read it and understand the policies. This way everyone is on the same playing field and there is no question regarding your expectations.

You've made a big investment in your business; you need to do everything you can to protect it, help it grow, and keep employees and customers happy.



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