

Tune In OR Be Tuned Out

Bosses matter to everyone they oversee, but they matter most to the people that directly report to them, who constantly tangle with the boss's virtues, foibles and quirks. Whether you are the CEO of a Fortune 500 company or the head coach of the world champion Miami Heat, your success depends on staying in tune with the people you interact with most frequently.

Robert Sutton, a professor of management science and engineering at Stanford University in his book *Good Boss, Bad Boss: How to Be the Best ... and Learn from the Worst* suggests several steps that bosses at all levels can practice to ensure that they stay in tune.

1. Express confidence even if you don't feel it

Executives need to use the faking-it-until-you-make-it strategy, which is based partly on self-discipline and partly on deception, until the deception becomes reality. It is deception in the sense that you pump yourself up and put a better face on things than you start off feeling. But after a while, if you act confident, you become more confident. Confidence is crucial for inspiring your followers, because like all emotions, it's contagious.

2. Don't dither

Indecision, delay and waffling are the hallmarks of a crummy boss. The best ones know that crisp and seemingly quick decisions bolster the illusion (and reality) that they are in charge. Don't dither; you can always change your mind later. Nobody minds that. What they do mind is the two minutes of agonizing to give an answer.

3. Get and give credit

A great thing about being the boss is that when your people do good work, you usually get too much of the credit. Smart bosses often use this to their advantage, knowing that people want to work for and do business with winners. The best bosses routinely give their followers more credit than they probably deserve. And when bosses do this, everyone wins.

4. Blame yourself

Bosses who ignore or stomp on their subordinates sometimes generate quick gains. But in the long run, such shortsightedness undermines creativity, efficiency and commitment. When something important happens, the boss is expected to know. Leaders who denounce outside forces for their troubles come across as disingenuous and powerless. If you as a boss want to enhance the perception that you are in charge—and fuel performance at the same time—taking at least some of the blame is usually necessary. The key, though, is not just to accept blame and apologize. You must also take immediate control in whatever way you can, show that you have learned from failure, announce new plans, and, when they are implemented, make sure everyone understands that things are improving because of them.

The most effective bosses devote enormous effort to understanding how their moods, skills and actions affect their followers' performance. They constantly make adjustments to be more helpful and constructive tomorrow than they were yesterday. To be a great boss, you must constantly ask and try to answer many questions. Perhaps the most crucial is, "What does it feel like to work for me?" If your people answered this question honestly, would they say that you know the impact your words and deeds have on them, or that you are living in a fool's paradise?