Is Your Leader a Boss?

The words leader and boss are used interchangeably; however, they have different meanings, and therefore carry different implications. By definition, a leader is someone who encourages and inspires, whereas a boss is someone who directs and controls. A leader leads from the front, but a boss drives from behind. The only similarity between them is that both represent someone who is in charge of others. Still, these two words are used routinely to mean the same thing.

In order to clarify the distinction, let’s consider the words of Booker T, Washington.[[1]](#footnote-1) “There are two ways of exerting one’s strength,” he asserted, “one is pushing down, the other is pulling up.” Although both measures involve an element of force, the act of “pushing down” restricts a person or thing to a fixed or confined position, often causing resistance, while “pulling up” encourages forward movement toward the source with little or no resistance. Interestingly, his assertion highlights a difference in style, and mirrors the fundamental difference that exists between a leader and a boss. The difference is leadership style.

Leaders exert their strength by “pulling up.” On the contrary, bosses exert their strength by “pushing down.” Leaders employ an open-door policy, and extend their invitation with charisma. By pulling others toward them, they earn the respect and trust of others, and gain a huge psychological advantage. Leaders build bridges that support dialogue and encourage the flow of information like traffic on a two-way street. They motivate others to go the extra mile.

Many historical leaders like Mohandas Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, and John F. Kennedy used their influence to mobilize others. They had charisma—a special magnetic appeal that [pulled] people toward [them] (Webster’s). And today, we have influential leaders like Michelle Obama, Oprah Winfrey, and Bill Clinton who possess similar charm. They have mastered the art of persuasion by effectively incorporating personal involvement with timely commendations for people’s effort. To put it the way Jim Rohn did: “They acknowledge that a good objective of leadership is to help those who are doing poorly to do well and to help those who are doing well to do even better.”

Moreover, leaders are people-oriented, people-centered, and supportive. Leaders accept that they do not always have the right answers, and that it is often necessary to seek input from those who are closer to the situation. They delegate responsibility and encourage autonomy. They understand that the best way to influence performance is by enabling ownership. They know that people will perform at their best when they have a stake in the outcome. For these reasons, it is relatively easy for leaders to influence others, and even the most notorious leader take advantage of this position.

Conversely, bosses exert their strength by “pushing down.” Bosses maintain a closed-door policy, and they ward off people with austerity. They instill fear and distrust. Their approach drives a wedge between them and others, and fuels an ongoing resistance which ultimately leads to the cul-de-sac of their final word.

Bosses are task-oriented, job-centered, and autocratic. Bosses make people feel dispensable, whether they are the “rising stars” or mere spectators in the organization. Bosses are mainly concerned about the structure and viability of the organization; they extend minimal concern for the welfare of individuals. Perhaps, the most unfavorable results for taking this approach is that responsibilities tend to seem painstakingly monotonous, and it becomes increasingly difficult to sustain productivity, especially when the boss is not around.

The effects of these two leadership styles have been discussed and highlighted in many books, journals, newspapers, magazines, and countless other sources of information. Most studies suggest that a leader who coaches and embraces his or her followers is more likely to sustain their respect and influence their behavior for the benefit of the organization as a whole.

Undoubtedly, there are many situations where firm leadership is required, but a balanced approach to leadership is far more rewarding for all concerned. Besides, a bossy director produces a cacophony of harsh resistance, whereas an exemplary leader orchestrates a symphony of harmonious support.

1. Booker T. Washington was one of the most influential spokesmen for African-Americans in the post-Reconstruction Era. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)