Managing and leading – the two sides of being the boss – are difficult and growing even harder. You must get the best from your people in a tough environment, meet the ever-rising expectations of your firm, satisfy more demanding customers, and besides all that, prepare yourself for greater challenges...

Interview by Giles Metcalfe

An interview with Linda A. Hill & Kent Lineback

Are you the boss you need to be? As good as your firm expects you to be? Good enough to achieve your career aspirations?

Being the Boss can help, no matter where you are on your journey. In it, Harvard Business School's Linda Hill and executive Kent Lineback combine six decades of research, teaching, practice, and observation to provide the insights and information you need to move forward.

Some managers are content with just getting by. But most stop making progress because they don’t understand how to become a great boss, what great bosses actually do, or where they currently stand in comparison with where they should be. In this book, the authors show you how to measure yourself against what’s required. At the end, you will clearly understand your strengths, where you need to make progress, and how to move forward.

Linda A. Hill, Wallace Brett Donham Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School, chairs the HBS Leadership Initiative; headed the team that developed HBS’s required MBA leadership course; and has chaired several HBS executive education courses, including the High Potentials Leadership Programme. She is the author of Becoming a Manager and numerous Harvard Business Review articles and Harvard Business Publishing corporate learning modules.

Kent Lineback, now a writer and collaborator, spent nearly 30 years as a manager and executive in business and government. He is the co-author (with Randy Komisar) of the best-seller The Monk and the Riddle.
What was the background to you writing *Being the Boss*?

For Linda, it was her experience with an earlier book, *Becoming a Manager*. Though that book was written about new managers, so many experienced managers told her they found it useful that she realized there was a need for a book like *Being the Boss*, which is aimed at any manager and leader who seeks to grow from good to great. In fact, that’s how an early reader characterized the book: “Good to Great for bosses.” For Kent, it was his 30 years of experience as a manager and executive. It’s the book he wishes he’d had throughout his career.

Is the book a roadmap or a playbook?

Both. It’s a roadmap for the journey from good to great. And for key parts of that journey, it also provides some fairly concrete instructions, a playbook, for what to do. It’s written in a way that guides the reader throughout to assess his or her own strengths and weaknesses.

It is written around the diary of one Jason Pedersen. Is your lead character based on a real person or is he an archetype? Why did you adopt this diary-based “fictional” approach over the more standard case studies?

Jason’s taken on a daunting new assignment and we meet him at the end of his first week when the full extent of his challenges has finally become clear. Each chapter opens with an ongoing description of the problems he’s dealing with on that Friday. Jason is a composite of managers and experiences we’re familiar with. Too often, we think, management and leadership (we try to integrate the two because bosses must do both) comes off as a series of “do this and do that” instructions, rather than an integrated set of behaviours. We wanted a setting that conveyed this sense that everything is all wrapped up together.

Why, for you, is becoming a manager so difficult?

Because it requires a personal transformation in not only how you work but in how you see yourself and how you try to add value.

What are the “manager’s three imperatives”?

Bosses are responsible for the work of others, and they carry out that responsibility by influencing others, including both those they control and those they don’t. If the key task of managing and leading is to influence others, the key question every boss must ask is, how do I influence others? The three imperatives – manage yourself, manage your network, manage your team – are the three key levers of influence, the way you shape the behaviour of others and the thoughts and feelings that shape that behaviour. The three imperatives also happen to be the areas where many managers make fundamental errors that limit their effectiveness. Finally, the three imperatives provide a useful framework for self-development. They help every boss identify where and how she or he needs to improve.

You talk about many different paradoxes in *Being the Boss* – is management work inherently paradoxical? What other factors come into the equation?

Yes, it is inherently paradoxical – that is, it requires the practitioner to balance constantly multiple needs that often appear to be in conflict – for example, perform today vs. prepare for tomorrow, meet the needs of a team and the needs of individual team members, and meet the needs of a team and satisfy the needs of the broader organization.

A promotion now means that you’re someone’s boss whereas before you were their friend and colleague – should they knuckle under and “respect your authority”? How should you deal with the change in the relationship dynamic? Can you be someone’s boss and still be their friend?

The situation you describe is probably one of the most problematic for a manager. We don’t think anyone should ever “knuckle under,” whatever the circumstances, but the boss and friend need to recognize the change in their relationship and work out how to keep both elements separate.

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We say in *Being the Boss* that the boss-direct report relationship should be close, caring, and fully human, but it cannot be a personal relationship in which maintaining the relationship takes precedence over the work and work considerations. That is, for example, the boss cannot give the friend a bonus or a promotion because of friendship rather than merit, even if the friend believes he should get it.

What are the elements of managerial competence?

Let us create some context. We identify trust as the foundation of all forms of influence other than coercion and we identify the components of trust as competence and character. There are three forms of competence: technical, operational, and political. To be considered competent, a boss must possess all three. Technical competence means you know what to do. Operational competence means you know how to do it, i.e., how to apply or use technical knowledge. And political competence means you know how to get work done in the organization, the social setting, where the work is being done.

What is the difference between a “big ego” and a “strong ego”, and what roles do they play in management technique?

We distinguish the two and say a fully effective boss needs a strong ego but not a big ego. Someone with a strong ego is resilient, able to persist in the face of adversity, and focused on accomplishing some aim beyond his or her own needs. A person with a big ego needs constant recognition and must have continuous personal attention; his or her personal needs are
paramount. A boss with a strong ego cares primarily about the work and the people doing the work and focuses on his or her duties and responsibilities around the work. A boss with a big ego considers his or her authority a mark of personal superiority and focuses on the privileges and status that come with it.

You focus a lot on the so-called “soft skills” – aren’t they actually the hardest skills to learn and get right in practice?

We focus on the three imperatives, which are more or less behaviours. We try to explain what bosses must do to be fully effective. However, it’s quickly obvious that to perform the necessary activities requires a variety of soft skills. You build trust, for example, by not only what you know and do but by who you are, your intentions.

You build a network by contacting people, but it does require some social skills (fewer than most people think, but not none). You build a team in part by creating a plan focused on a purpose, but a plan is not just a document but an ongoing sense of the future and how it will develop. Yes, these are hard skills to learn, and that’s a key reason it takes so long to become a fully effective manager and leader.

Words like character, trust, and integrity are used in your book – is there still a place for these traditional, solid and perhaps somewhat staid values in the 21st century workplace?

There’s a place for them as long as being a boss is fundamentally a social activity – i.e., an activity consisting of human interactions.

You talk about a “critical choice” that managers have to make – “turn inward” or “turn outward.” Can you expand on this for us?

Many managers hate what they call the “political games” that occur in virtually all organizations. They believe all decisions should be based on logic and analysis and that the “right” choice will be more or less obvious. They think most conflict in organizations is driven primarily by the “right” choice will be more or less obvious. They don’t realize that conflict is built into all those outside their immediate groups only as the work gets resolved through influence. Those with the most needs over time.

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Many managers hate what they call the “political games” that occur in virtually all organizations. They believe all decisions should be based on logic and analysis and that the “right” choice will be more or less obvious. They think most conflict in organizations is driven primarily by people’s needs for power and recognition. So they “turn inward” and focus on their own groups. They deal with those outside their immediate groups only as the work requires. They don’t realize that conflict is built into all organizations because of division of labour, interdependence, and scarce resources and that conflict gets resolved through influence. Those with the most influence will get what they and their groups need to do their work well. Hence, all managers, in order to do their jobs, must learn to build and exercise influence in a political – i.e., a conflict-filled – environment. They must learn to influence those over whom they have no authority or control. To do that, they must “turn outward” and build ongoing connections with those on whom they’re dependent. This doesn’t mean they must play politics, which we define as exercising influence to satisfy one’s own ends and ambitions. But they must actively seek to influence others for mutual support.

How can a new manager gain influence over people and groups that they do not formally control?

By building networks of those they depend on and who depend on them to do their work. Relationships created and reinforced only when there are problems or issues to resolve aren’t enough. Instead of such problematic ties, managers need to consciously create and sustain ongoing relationships aimed at providing what each party needs over time.

Should managers engage with and in office politics, or strive to rise above it?

It depends on what you mean by “politics.” If it’s the struggle for personal power and status, managers should rise above it. But if by politics you mean the development and exercise of influence in an organization to achieve legitimate work goals, then managers must participate. We believe it is possible to influence others effectively in a political environment in ways that are honourable.

What tools and skills do managers need to “weave their own web of influence”?

They need the personal courage and minimal social skills for initiating contact with others and finding common ground. This is not about creating personal ties. These are work ties with a human connection aimed at mutual benefit.

Being a boss to someone, and in turn having a boss yourself, gives rise to a dilemma you discuss in the book, namely “The boss is not only a potential source of great help, in both your job and your career, but also the one who evaluates your performance”. Is this dual role of coach and judge reconcilable? What if your boss is your critic or is adversarial?

Bosses need to be both coach and judge, and obviously good coaching begins with insightful assessment. But when coaching doesn’t work, when someone cannot measure up after being given all possible help, coaching must end and judging takes over. Obviously, there are bosses who only judge. If you have such a boss, you can seek coaching either from the boss or someone she or he recommends. You can try to have a productive discussion about how to improve. But if the boss has a personal need to tear others down or competes with those who work for him, that’s a problem, and you may need to seek another position.

What is your definition of a team in a management context?

It’s a group of people who are committed to a common purpose and to goals based on that purpose, who are committed to working together productively, and who believe they will succeed or fail together.

What are “the four elements of building and sustaining a real team”? How can you ensure that all team members are “on the bus” and that they are happy for you to be in the driving seat?

Teams are a powerful tool of management influence because the social structure of a team can be such a powerful shaper of members’ behaviour. Members work hard not for you the boss but because they want to do...
their part for the team and not let their team mates down. There’s a lot of malarkey about teams – you cannot put up a poster and declare yourself a team – but when a group becomes a true team, it’s very powerful. The four elements needed to create a team are purpose and goals, clear roles and responsibilities, commonly-agreed work processes, and a team culture that shapes how people treat each other (e.g., what kind of conflict is permissible and what kind is not).

Is it better to be a reactive or a proactive manager?

Every manager needs to be proactive, to take responsibility for performance and take those steps necessary to produce the results needed. But it’s the nature of managerial work that so much of it is reacting to the unplanned and unexpected. The secret, if there is one in management, is to respond to the unexpected in ways that advance your aims as a manager – to develop people, for example, or to foster a team culture, or to make progress on the team’s goals. In short, react proactively. Good managers use their responses to the unexpected to advance their agendas as managers. If they don’t, they likely will never have time to pursue their agendas.

How can managers “manage through their daily work”? Can you expand on your concept of “Prep-Do-Review”

There are really two concepts here. First, the idea of Prep-Do-Review, which simply means “think before you act.” Before taking any step as a manager, we encourage you to stop and think about it for at least a few seconds. So much comes at managers that is unplanned and unexpected that they (like all the rest of us) tend to deal with it as quickly as possible and move on. Specifically, we recommend that bosses adopt this practice and, in the Prep phase before reacting to something unplanned, think of how to deal with it so as to build trust, create or sustain a network, or foster progress on some team goal – in short, so as to pursue one of the three imperatives.

What is the difference between a good and a great leader?

A great leader and her team not only meet expectations consistently but they do the best work they’re capable of doing. In other words, a great leader not only closes the “performance gap” (lifts performance to what’s expected) but also closes the “opportunity gap” (lifts performance to the highest level possible). A good leader has learned some of the three imperatives and demonstrates that proficiency much of the time. A great leader has mastered all the imperatives and demonstrates that proficiency most of the time.

What is next for you?

Linda is co-authoring another book with colleagues on leadership for innovation. It should be out late this year or early 2012. Kent is working on what he calls “tools for the journey,” aides that managers and leaders can use to manage more effectively and learn from their experience.

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