



1 The No-Boss Boss

One of the most frustrating kinds of bad bosses is the boss who really isn't there: the "no-boss boss." This is the opposite of the overly aggressive, controlling, or micromanaging boss. It's the boss who manages by not managing; the leader who leads by not leading. This boss often does not make decisions and lets things ride until someone else has to make the decision. He's a boss who often does not know what is going on and depends on subordinates to know. In short, this boss may have the title, but in fact has left the ship rudderless or without a captain. As a result, management and leadership by default fall onto the employees. But this is not the same as a self-managed team, where team members have a clear idea of what they are doing, know who's in charge, understand the limits of their authority, and set their goals and tasks to get there. Instead, there is more of a sense of muddling along and filling in because the boss's lack of management has created a leadership vacuum.

How does a boss end up in or continue in this position? One common way is when a person with technical expertise gets promoted into management, yet is still making a good technical contribution. The person may even continue to be supported by upper-level management because of his contributions as a technical expert. As long as the boss has an assistant or other employees who can pick up the management/leadership slack, the situation can continue.

Yet, while some employees might welcome the freedom and autonomy of a boss who is missing in action, this situation often leaves employees frustrated and uncertain about what's going on. Additionally, some nonmanagerial employees taking on the management role might come to feel resentment and think they are underpaid, since they have in fact become the managers.

That's what happened to Corinne, who worked as an assistant to such a boss at a large company that created software for games. In her division, about 40 employees worked on software development. Her boss, Ben, reported to one of two company vice presidents. Though Corrine had been in her job for three years, she found it frustrating because Ben made no decisions. Corrine described Ben this way: "He's basically involved in his own little world, doing his own projects, creating his own programs. But he doesn't make any decisions or manage anything. If I or someone else goes to him with an idea, he'll say go with it. Or if there is some dissension or problem in the office, he'll put his head in the sand and keep working on his own thing, which involves programming and coding. I've mostly taken up the slack, and people come to me all the time to make decisions. Ben tells me to go ahead and do whatever I think is best. But it's really frustrating."

As an example, the company had a big meeting about a pending deal to acquire a large slot machine company. The other company's software division was much larger, with about 100 employees, so there was some question about who would end up running the division and whether there might be some company layoffs. But instead of talking about the pending deal, the meeting turned into a sales powwow about the new products the company would now be selling. Afterward, "everyone in our department went ballistic," Corrine recalls. "They were concerned about such things as, 'What's happening to my job?' and 'What'll happen to my 401(k)?' So about a dozen people came to me to find out, and we all went together to see Ben to find out what's going on. His answer was, 'I don't know.' He didn't even know what the meeting would be about before we went. I told him he would have to find some answers for everyone. But all he did was call up the VP, who's his supervisor, and tell him, 'You've got a problem. You have to talk to everyone and calm them down.' So essentially, he just dropped the problem in his supervisor's lap, and the VP called me to arrange for a meeting, which I did."

In most other cases, Ben simply rubber-stamped everyday decisions that Corrine made herself. Typically, his input would be, "That's fine. That's a good idea." And Corrine would go ahead and do it.

The office operated this way for three years, with Ben essentially taking a hands-off approach to management while Corrine filled in the gaps. Perhaps she should have been aware that such an arrangement might be the case when Ben first hired her. He had just been hired from another company, and he told Corrine her job would be to run the office. Although she didn't know a lot of the technical terms for the software products being developed, Ben left it to her to pick up whatever she needed to know on her own. He also left it largely up to her to figure out what her job should be and left her alone to do whatever it was, with little idea about or interest in what that might be. After Corrine was there for several months, Ben asked her to make a list of what she did. When she turned in a four-page list of job activities, he looked at her list in amazement, and said: "Damn. I didn't know you did all that. Keep up the good work." Then he went back to work on one of his projects.

While Ben had an open-door policy and invited Corrine or any employee to come to see him, the discussions had relatively little effect. According to Corrine, "He knows what we would all like: some more direction or guidance from him. But he doesn't do that. He can't make a decision and doesn't know what's going on himself."

So by default, people in the office came to Corrine for direction and she took over the management role. The situation dragged on for several years. Though Corrine tried several times to get out of that position and be promoted into management or work directly for the vice president, he didn't want to make any changes. Corrine got additional raises for staying where she was, so she was very well paid as an administrative assistant. The vice president told her, "You're the glue that holds everything together." So he wanted her to keep doing what she had been doing, rather than promoting her.

Despite feelings of frustration for herself and the other employees in the department, Corrine continued to accept the status quo and planned to ride out the upcoming merger. The vice president assured her she would still "fit in." Also, she suspected that Ben wouldn't make it through the merger, so another higher-level posi-

tion might be in the cards for the future. For now, though, there was too much uncertainty to know. So Corrine decided to play a waiting game to see how it would “all shake out” over the next few months.

What Should Corrine Do?

In Corrine’s place, what would you do and why? What do you think the outcomes of these different options would be? Here are some possibilities:

- Insist on getting a higher management title, not just more money, if you are going to be taking on a management role.
- Continue to make the decisions and don’t worry about keeping Ben informed unless he asks, since he will generally rubber-stamp whatever you do.
- Reassure others in the department that you will be making most of the decisions, so they don’t feel confused and frustrated.
- Don’t be concerned about not knowing the technical details of the work because many managers are hired for their skill in managing people, not their technical knowledge.
- Since the vice president feels your role in keeping the department going is critical, be firm when you ask to be transferred into another position. He will realize he needs to do this, or you will leave.
- Keep doing what you are doing and wait for the merger, since you will probably be staying on and Ben will be gone. Then you can figure out what to do.
- Gather others from the department to join you and schedule a meeting with Ben to emphasize that you need him to provide more direction, decisions, and information, so the department will be more productive, and people will better understand and feel more committed to what they are doing.

In this case, you would probably do well to keep doing what you are doing, but learn to be more accepting so you feel comfortable with the situation. It seems clear that Ben really is not suited to or capable of being a good manager. He is a technical expert; this is what he

likes to do and is good at, and he does not have the kind of people and managerial or leadership skills need for good management.

After a couple of years of this arrangement, it doesn't seem that it will be productive to talk to him about doing anything any differently. Ben probably can't or doesn't want to change, so there's no use trying. At the same time, the office seems to be thriving under your leadership, even though people are frustrated and confused by the lack of clarity. Thus, it might be good to clarify with others in the department what you are doing, so they expect to come to you for answers and decisions. It may be less necessary to include Ben in the loop on many of these decisions, since he doesn't seem to know or care about what is going on. Then you and everyone else might be less frustrated, and Ben may welcome the freedom from many day-to-day management activities. Perhaps you could tell him from time to time what you are doing, and point out that you thought this arrangement would help to relieve him of many responsibilities so he can focus on his projects. That way he at least will feel included and not pushed out. As you tell him about different decisions you are making and activities in the office, you can get a sense of how much he needs to know and either cut back on what you are telling him or tell him more.

As for the management title, you may have to let that go for the time being, since the vice president seems inclined to trust you to do the job but doesn't want to rock the boat. At the same time, you have been getting extra pay to compensate for your additional responsibilities. Once the merger is finalized, this may be the time to push for a formal promotion into a management position that reflects what you are actually doing. And there's no need to worry about knowing the technicalities of software development and coding, since you have 40 people in the department who know about those things. What they need from you are your management and leadership skills, not your knowledge about software.

In short, it would seem like a win-win situation for everyone if you were to continue taking over the management/leadership vacuum left by Ben's lack of interest in this role. Make it clearer to the other employees and yourself that this is what you are doing, and you will feel less frustrated and uncertain about what you are doing yourself. As long as upper management knows what is going on and

rewards you for your efforts, you can probably count on a promotion sometime in the future.

Today's Take-Aways

- ☑ If there's a management vacuum, you can fill it yourself; after all, nature abhors a vacuum.
- ☑ If you have a boss who isn't acting like a boss, it may be because he really doesn't want to be a boss and would really rather just be a technical expert.
- ☑ If you're a better manager or leader than your boss, then go do it; in the long run, you will be recognized as a manager and a leader, too.
- ☑ If your boss is making no decisions, that is a decision to continue the status quo. If that's not what you want, seek to make the decision yourself so you are better able to get what you want.