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# Are You A Good Boss— Or a Great One?

If you want to keep growing as a leader,  
ask yourself these key questions.

*by Linda A. Hill and Kent Lineback*

“Am I good enough?”

“Am I ready? This is my big opportunity, but now I’m not sure I’m prepared.”

These thoughts plagued Jason, an experienced manager, as he lay awake one night fretting about a new position he’d taken. For more than five years he had run a small team of developers in Boston. They produced two highly successful lines of engineering textbooks for the education publishing arm of a major media conglomerate. On the strength of his reputation as a great manager of product development, he’d been chosen by the company to take over an online technical-education start-up based in London.

Jason arrived at his new office on a Monday morning, excited and confident, but by the end of his first week he was beginning to wonder whether he was up to the challenge. In his previous work he had led people who’d worked together before and required coordination but little supervision. There were problems, of course, but nothing like what he’d discovered in this new venture. Key members of his group barely talked to one another. Other publishers in the company, whose materials and collaboration he desperately needed, angrily viewed his new group as competition. The goals he’d been set seemed impossible—the group was about to miss some early milestones—and a crucial partnership with an outside organization had been badly, perhaps irretrievably, damaged. On top of all that, his boss, who was located in New York, offered little help. “That’s why you’re there” was the typical response whenever Jason described a problem. By Friday he was worried about living up to the expectations implied in that response.

Do Jason’s feelings sound familiar? Such moments of doubt and even fear may and often do come despite years of management experience. Any number of events can trigger them: An initiative you’re running isn’t going as expected. Your people aren’t

performing as they should. You hear talk in the group that “the real problem here is lack of leadership.” You think you’re doing fine until you, like Jason, receive a daunting new assignment. You’re given a lukewarm performance review. Or one day you simply realize that you’re no longer growing and advancing—you’re stuck.

### Most Managers Stop Working on Themselves

The whole question of how managers grow and advance is one we’ve studied, thought about, and lived with for years. As a professor working with high potentials, MBAs, and executives from around the globe, Linda meets people who want to contribute to their organizations and build fulfilling careers. As an executive, Kent has worked with managers at all levels of both private and public organizations. All our experience brings us to a simple but troubling observation: Most bosses reach a certain level of proficiency and stop there—short of what they could and should be.

We’ve discussed this observation with countless colleagues, who almost without exception have seen what we see: Organizations usually have a few great managers, some capable ones, a horde of mediocre ones, some poor ones, and some awful ones. The great majority of people we work with are well-intentioned, smart, accomplished individuals. Many progress and fulfill their ambitions. But too many derail and fail to live up to their potential. Why? Because they stop working on themselves.

Managers rarely ask themselves, “How good am I?” and “Do I need to be better?” unless they’re shocked into it. When did *you* last ask those questions? On the spectrum of great to awful bosses, where do you fall?



## Idea in Brief

Many managers underestimate the transformational challenges of their roles—or they become complacent and stop growing and improving. At best they learn to get by; at worst they become terrible bosses. Sometimes even the best of them suffer doubts and fears despite years of management experience.

Three imperatives can guide managers on their journey to becoming great bosses: (1) *Manage yourself*. Productive influence comes from people's trust in your competence and character. (2) *Manage your network*. The organization as a whole must be engaged to create the conditions for your own and your team's success.

(3) *Manage your team*. Effective managers forge a high-performing “we” out of all the individuals who report to them.

Constant and probing self-assessment across these three imperatives is essential, the authors write. They include a useful assessment tool to help readers get started.

Managers in new assignments usually start out receptive to change. The more talented and ambitious ones choose stretch assignments, knowing that they'll have much to learn at first. But as they settle in and lose their fear of imminent failure, they often grow complacent. Every organization has its ways of doing things—policies, standard practices, and unspoken guidelines, such as “promote by seniority” and “avoid conflict.” Once they're learned, managers often use them to get by—to “manage” in the worst sense of the word.

It doesn't help that a majority of the organizations we see offer their managers minimal support and rarely press the experienced ones to improve. Few expect more of their leaders than short-term results, which by themselves don't necessarily indicate real management skill.

In our experience, however, the real culprit is neither managerial complacency nor organizational failure: It is a lack of understanding. When bosses are questioned, it's clear that many of them have stopped making progress because they simply *don't know how to*.

**Do you understand what's required to become truly effective?** Too often managers underestimate how much time and effort it takes to keep growing and developing. Becoming a great boss is a lengthy, difficult process of learning and change, driven mostly by personal experience. Indeed, so much time and effort are required that you can think of the process as a journey—a journey of years.

What makes the journey especially arduous is that the lessons involved cannot be taught. Leadership is using yourself as an instrument to get things done in the organization, so it is about self-development. There are no secrets and few shortcuts. You and every other manager must learn the lessons yourself, based on your own experience as a boss. If you don't understand the nature of the journey, you're more

likely to pause or lose hope and tell yourself, “I can't do this” or “I'm good enough already.”

**Do you understand what you're trying to attain?** We all know how disorganized, fragmented, and even chaotic every manager's workdays are. Given this reality, which is intensifying as work and organizations become more complex and fluid, how can you as a boss do anything more than cope with what comes at you day by day?

To deal with the chaos, you need a clear underlying sense of what's important and where you and your group want to be in the future. You need a mental model that you can lay over the chaos and into which you can fit all the messy pieces as they come at you. This way of thinking begins with a straightforward definition: Management is responsibility for the performance of a group of people.

It's a simple idea, yet putting it into practice is difficult, because management is *defined* by responsibility but *done* by exerting influence. To influence others you must make a difference not only in what they do but also in the thoughts and feelings that drive their actions. How do you actually do this?

To answer that question, you need an overarching, integrated way of thinking about your work as a manager. We offer an approach based on studies of management practice, our own observations, and our knowledge of where managers tend to go wrong. We call it the *three imperatives*: Manage yourself. Manage your network. Manage your team.

Is this the only way to describe management? No, of course not. But it's clear, straightforward, and, above all, focused on what managers must actually do. People typically think of “management” as just the third imperative, but today all three are critical to success. Together they encompass the crucial activities that effective managers must perform to influence others. Mastering them is the purpose of your journey.

### Manage Yourself

Management begins with you, because who you are as a person, what you think and feel, the beliefs and values that drive your actions, and especially how you connect with others all matter to the people you must influence. Every day those people examine every interaction with you, your every word and deed, to uncover your intentions. They ask themselves, “Can I trust this person?” How hard they work, their level of personal commitment, their willingness to accept your influence, will depend in large part on the qualities they see in you. And their perceptions will determine the answer to this fundamental question every manager must ask: Am I someone who can influence others productively?

Who you are shows up most clearly in the relationships you form with others, especially those for whom you’re responsible. It’s easy to get those crucial relationships wrong. Effective managers possess the self-awareness and self-management required to get them right.

José, a department head, told us of two managers who worked for him in the marketing department of a large maker of durable goods. Both managers were struggling to deliver the results expected of their groups. Both, it turned out, were creating dysfunctional relationships. One was frankly ambivalent about being “the boss” and hated it when people referred to him that way. He wanted to be liked, so he tried to build close personal relationships. He would say, in effect, “Do what I ask because we’re friends.” That worked for a while until, for good reasons, he had to turn down one “friend” for promotion and deny another one a bonus. Naturally, those people felt betrayed, and their dissatisfaction began to poison the feelings of everyone else in the group.

The other manager took the opposite approach. With her it was all business. No small talk or reaching out to people as people. For her, results mattered, and she’d been made the boss because she was the one who knew what needed to be done; it was the job of her people to execute. Not surprisingly, her message was always “Do what I say because I’m the boss.” She was effective—until people began leaving.



Trust is the foundation of all forms of influence other than coercion. You need to foster it.

If productive influence doesn’t arise from being liked (“I’m your friend!”) or from fear (“I’m the boss!”), where does it come from? From people’s trust in you as a manager. That trust has two components: belief in your *competence* (you know what to do and how to do it) and belief in your *character* (your motives are good and you want your people to do well).

Trust is the foundation of all forms of influence other than coercion, and you need to conduct yourself with others in ways that foster it. Management really does begin with who you are as a person.

### Manage Your Network

We once talked to Kim, the head of a software company division, just as he was leaving a meeting of a task force consisting of his peers. He had proposed a new way of handling interdivisional sales, which he believed would increase revenue by encouraging each division to cross-sell other divisions’ products. At the meeting he’d made an extremely well-researched, carefully reasoned, and even compelling case for his proposal—which the group rejected with very little discussion. “How many of these people did you talk to about your proposal before the meeting?” we asked. None, it turned out. “But I anticipated all their questions and objections,” he protested, adding with some bitterness, “It’s just politics. If they can’t see what’s good for the company and them, I can’t help them.”

Many managers resist the need to operate effectively in their organizations’ political environments. They consider politics dysfunctional—a sign the organization is broken—and don’t realize that it unavoidably arises from three features inherent in all organizations: *division of labor*, which creates disparate groups with disparate and even conflicting goals and priorities; *interdependence*, which means that none of those groups can do their work without the others; and *scarce resources*, for which groups necessarily compete. Obviously, some organizations handle the politics better than others, but conflict and competition among groups are inevitable. How do they get resolved? Through organizational influence. Groups whose managers have influence tend to get what they need; other groups don’t.

Unfortunately, many managers deal with conflict by trying to avoid it. “I hate company politics!” they

say. “Just let me do my job.” But effective managers know they cannot turn away. Instead, with integrity and for good ends, they proactively engage the organization to create the conditions for their success. They build and nurture a broad network of ongoing relationships with those they need and those who need them; that is how they influence people over whom they have no formal authority. They also take responsibility for making their boss, a key member of their network, a source of influence on their behalf.

### Manage Your Team

As a manager, Wei worked closely with each of her people, who were spread across the U.S. and the Far East. But she rarely called a virtual group meeting, and only once had her group met face-to-face. “In my experience,” she told us, “meetings online or in person are usually a waste of time. Some people do all the yakking, others stay silent, and not much gets done. It’s a lot more efficient for me to work with each person and arrange for them to coordinate when that’s necessary.” It turned out, though, that she was spending all her time “coordinating,” which included a great deal of conflict mediation. People under her seemed to be constantly at odds, vying for the scarce resources they needed to achieve their disparate goals and complaining about what others were or were not doing.

Too many managers overlook the possibilities of creating a real team and managing their people as a whole. They don’t realize that managing one-on-one is just not the same as managing a group and that they can influence individual behavior much more effectively through the group, because most of us are social creatures who want to fit in and be accepted as part of the team. How do you make the people who work for you, whether on a project or permanently, into a real team—a group of people who are mutually committed to a common purpose and the goals related to that purpose?

To do collective work that requires varied skills, experience, and knowledge, teams are more creative and productive than groups of individuals who merely cooperate. In a real team, members hold themselves and one another jointly accountable. They share a genuine conviction that they will succeed or fail together. A clear and compelling purpose,

and concrete goals and plans based on that purpose, are critical. Without them no group will coalesce into a real team.

Team culture is equally important. Members need to know what’s required of them collectively and individually; what the team’s values, norms, and standards are; how members are expected to work together (what kind of conflict is acceptable or unacceptable, for example); and how they should communicate. It’s your job to make sure they have all this crucial knowledge.

Effective managers also know that even in a cohesive team they cannot ignore individual members. Every person wants to be a valued member of a group *and* needs individual recognition. You must be able to provide the attention members need, but always in the context of the team.

And finally, effective managers know how to lead a team through the work it does day after day—including the unplanned problems and opportunities that frequently arise—to make progress toward achieving their own and the team’s goals.

### Be Clear on How You’re Doing

The three imperatives will help you influence both those who work for you and those who don’t. Most important, they provide a clear and actionable road map for your journey. You must master them to become a fully effective manager.

These imperatives are not simply distinct managerial competencies. They are tightly integrated activities, each of which depends on the others. Getting your person-to-person relationships right is critical to building a well-functioning team and giving its individual members the attention they need. A compelling team purpose, bolstered by clear goals and plans, is the foundation for a strong network, and a network is indispensable for reaching your team’s goals.

Knowing where you’re going is only the first half of what’s required. You also need to know at all times where you are on your journey and what you must do to make progress. We’re all aware that the higher you rise in an organization, the less feedback you get about your performance. You have to be prepared to regularly assess yourself.



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ARE YOU A GOOD BOSS—OR A GREAT ONE?

# Measuring Yourself on the Three Imperatives

Are you performing all the activities necessary to be an effective boss?

To get some sense of where you stand, assess yourself on the following questions:

		I NEED TO MAKE PROGRESS					THIS IS A STRENGTH				
MANAGE YOURSELF	1. Do you use your formal authority effectively?	THIS IS A STRENGTH IF you consider it a useful tool but not your primary means of influencing others. You make clear why you do what you do—and even share your authority with others when possible and appropriate. You focus more on the responsibilities that come with authority than on the personal privileges it provides.					1	2	3	4	5
	2. Do you create thoughtful but not overly personal relationships?	THIS IS A STRENGTH IF your relationships are rich in human connections but always focused on the purpose and goals of the team and the organization. You avoid trying to influence people by befriending them.					1	2	3	4	5
	3. Do others trust you as a manager?	THIS IS A STRENGTH IF people, particularly your own, believe in your competence, intentions, and values. You demonstrate concern for their individual success.					1	2	3	4	5
	4. Do you exercise your influence ethically?	THIS IS A STRENGTH IF you consistently identify stakeholders, weigh their interests, and try to mitigate any harm that your actions may cause as you attempt to accomplish a greater good.					1	2	3	4	5
MANAGE YOUR NETWORK	5. Do you systematically identify those who should be in your network?	THIS IS A STRENGTH IF you are always aware of which people and groups you and your team depend on, and vice versa, as circumstances change.					1	2	3	4	5
	6. Do you proactively build and maintain your network?	THIS IS A STRENGTH IF you create and sustain relationships with those in your network, connect frequently with them, and support their needs.					1	2	3	4	5
	7. Do you use your network to provide the protection and resources your team needs?	THIS IS A STRENGTH IF you protect your team from distractions and misunderstandings, use your network to solve problems inside and outside the team, and secure the funds, people, and other resources it needs.					1	2	3	4	5
	8. Do you use your network to accomplish your team's goals?	THIS IS A STRENGTH IF you form coalitions of network members to support your team's goals and help others in your network achieve theirs. Your network colleagues believe in your competence and character.					1	2	3	4	5
MANAGE YOUR TEAM	9. Do you define and constantly refine your team's vision for the future?	THIS IS A STRENGTH IF you've defined your team's purpose and the goals, strategies, and actions that will take you there. You constantly gather information, discuss your plans with others, and refine your ideas.					1	2	3	4	5
	10. Do you clarify roles, work rules, team culture, and feedback about performance for your team?	THIS IS A STRENGTH IF your people feel a strong sense of "we"—that they're all pulling together toward the same worthwhile goals. They know how they individually contribute and what the team's work involves. They receive regular feedback from you.					1	2	3	4	5
	11. Do you know and manage your people as individuals as well as team members?	THIS IS A STRENGTH IF you interact equitably with all team members individually. You delegate, strive to help people grow, and constantly assess their performance. You hire people who both fit the team and add diversity, and you deal with performance issues quickly.					1	2	3	4	5
	12. Do you use daily activities and problems to pursue the three imperatives?	THIS IS A STRENGTH IF you regularly consider how every problem, obligation, or event can help you build your team, make progress on its goals, develop people, and strengthen your network.					1	2	3	4	5

**HOW DID YOU DO?** Did your responses cover the whole range from 1 to 5? If you consistently assessed yourself at 3 or above, you should be skeptical. In our experience, few bosses merit high ratings across the board. Did you give yourself mostly 3s? Take care not to hide in the middle, telling yourself, "I'm OK—not great, but not failing either." And don't be satisfied to stay there. "I'm not failing" is the watchword of those who are comfortable—and stuck.



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Too many managers seem to assume that development happens automatically. They have only a vague sense of the goal and of where they stand in relation to it. They tell themselves, “I’m doing all right” or “As I take on more challenges, I’ll get better.” Consequently, those managers fall short. There’s no substitute for routinely taking a look at yourself and how you’re doing. (The exhibit “Measuring Yourself on the Three Imperatives” will help you do this.)

Don’t be discouraged if you find several areas in which you could do better. No manager will meet all the standards implicit in the three imperatives. The goal is not perfection. It’s developing the strengths you need for success and compensating for any fatal shortcomings. Look at your strengths and weaknesses in the context of your organization. What knowledge and skills does it—or will it—need to reach its goals? How can your strengths help it move forward? Given its needs and priorities, what weaknesses must you address right away? The answers become your personal learning goals.

### What You Can Do Right Now

Progress will come only from your work experience: from trying and learning, observing and interacting with others, experimenting, and sometimes pushing yourself beyond the bounds of comfort—and then assessing yourself on the three imperatives again and again. Above all, take responsibility for your own development; ultimately, all development is self-development.

You won’t make progress unless you consciously act. Before you started a business, you would draw up a business plan broken into manageable steps with milestones; do the same as you think about your journey. Set personal goals. Solicit feedback from others. Take advantage of company training programs. Create a network of trusted advisers, including role models and mentors. Use your strengths to seek out developmental experiences. We know you’ve heard all this advice before, and it is good advice. But what we find most effective is building the learning into your daily work.

For this purpose we offer a simple approach we call *prep, do, review*.

**Prep.** Begin each morning with a quick preview of the coming day’s events. For each one, ask yourself how you can use it to develop as a manager and in particular how you can work on your specific learning goals. Consider delegating a task you would normally take on yourself and think about how you

might do that—to whom, what questions you should ask, what boundaries or limits you should set, what preliminary coaching you might provide. Apply the same thinking during the day when a problem comes up unexpectedly. Before taking any action, step back and consider how it might help you become better. Stretch yourself. If you don’t move outside familiar patterns and practice new approaches, you’re unlikely to learn.

**Do.** Take whatever action is required in your daily work, and as you do, use the new and different approaches you planned. Don’t lose your resolve. For example, if you tend to cut off conflict in a meeting, even constructive conflict, force yourself to hold back so that disagreement can be expressed and worked through. Step in only if the discussion becomes personal or points of view are being stifled. The ideas that emerge may lead you to a better outcome.

**Review.** After the action, examine what you did and how it turned out. This is where learning actually occurs. Reflection is critical, and it works best if you make it a regular practice. For example, set aside time toward the end of each day—perhaps on your commute home. Which actions worked well? What might you have done differently? Replay conversations. Compare what you did with what you might have done if you were the manager you aspire to be. Where did you disappoint yourself, and how did that happen? Did you practice any new behaviors or otherwise make progress on your journey?

Some managers keep notes about how they spent their time, along with thoughts about what they learned. One CEO working on a corporate globalization strategy told us he’d started recording every Friday his reflections about the past week. Within six weeks, he said, he’d developed greater discipline to say no to anything “not on the critical path,” which gave him time to spend with key regulators and to jump-start the strategy.

If you still need to make progress on your journey, that should spur you to action, not discourage you. You can become what you want and need to be. But you must take personal responsibility for mastering the three imperatives and assessing where you are now. ♥

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