




Are You a True Leader or Just a Boss?

There's a distinction between being a boss and being a leader. Which one are you?



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Being promoted to a management role is a huge accomplishment, but many professionals find the responsibility more challenging than they imagined. Being someone's boss doesn't necessarily mean you're a good leader.





Effective leadership is increasingly essential in the workplace, as more and more employees leave otherwise excellent companies over one resolvable element – bad bosses. According to a [study by GoodHire](#), 82% of all surveyed professionals would potentially [quit their job](#) because of a [bad boss](#).

There are crucial differences between bosses and leaders, so it's crucial to analyze your [leadership style](#) to ensure you're effectively steering your team in the right direction.

Did You Know?



Even people who start out with less effective management skills can modify their behavior to [become good leaders](#).

What are the differences between a boss and a leader?

According to the father of modern management, [Peter Drucker](#), above all else, all business managers must be leaders. But when many professionals step into management or supervisory roles, they wonder, “What are the qualities of a boss versus a leader?”

We spoke with leadership experts to discover five crucial differences between the two.

As you read the following comparisons, reflect on your actions to determine where you fall.

1. Bosses command; leaders influence.

According to Sue Andrews, business and HR consultant at KIS Finance, a key difference is that a boss’s authority comes from their position. In contrast, a leader’s authority comes from their ability to influence others.

“A boss is there to ensure that employees follow the rules of an organization, but a leader will encourage others to think for themselves to achieve the desired ends,” Andrews said. “A boss will need to give orders to instruct others what to do, but a leader can inspire others to find the best way forward, whilst motivating them to maximize their potential.”

[Related article: [35 Inspiring Leadership Quotes](#)]

Although subordinates follow bosses only because they have to, bosses can grow their influence through encouraging behavior, added Ken Gosnell, founder of CEO Experience. “You can grow your influence by caring for your team, listening to their thoughts and ideas, and sharing the ‘why’ behind the decisions and actions that you take. This is the second step in leadership, but it makes all the difference, and people will follow you because they want to, and not just because they have to.”

2. Bosses explain; leaders inspire.

You shouldn’t just explain a task and leave it in your employee’s hands. According to Christine Macdonald, director of The Hub Events, a boss ensures you understand your work, while a leader supports and guides you through it.

“The biggest difference between a leader and a boss is that a good leader inspires people and makes them excited about their work,” she said.

Success takes passion; without the desire to complete tasks, workers won't be as driven to give their best performances. As their leader, you should motivate them by letting them know the importance of their work.

3. Bosses discipline; leaders mentor.



Employees are human, and mistakes are to be expected. Who you are as a boss is evident in how you deal with mishaps. While bosses are more likely to use a reward-and-punishment system to discourage poor behavior, great leaders understand that employees benefit from encouragement and mentorship. If an employee performs well in a specific line of work, that strength should be recognized and mastered.

“One key element of leadership is the ability to harness the talents of others to achieve a common goal,” Macdonald said.

It's essential to note each employee's strengths and weaknesses and mentor them independently. Rather than attacking skill gaps, work to patch them by guiding employees through their shortcomings and building their confidence in new areas.

Tip



To **become a better mentor**, listen, communicate, offer constructive feedback, delegate, and practice empathy.

4. Bosses delegate tasks; leaders delegate authority.

A boss focuses on their department's objectives and stringently follows protocol to achieve those goals. They think for the short term, delegate tasks to their subordinates and tend to micromanage.

Executive and leadership coach Christina J. Eisinger says a boss has key objectives to meet, while a leader sets the team's long-term vision and uses it as "a key motivator."

"A boss gets results by telling people what to do and is concerned with doing it right," she said. "A leader is skilled at results by enabling their team to figure out what to do and is concerned with doing what is right."

Andrews added that leaders seek to drive commitment by setting an example for others to follow and inspire others by encouraging development. "They are comfortable delegating authority and avoid micromanaging, preferring to see others develop. Utilizing their excellent communication and negotiation skills, they will influence others for the overall benefit of the organization." **[Related article: [3 Elements of Delegation All Managers Should Know](#)]**



Did You Know?

According to the GoodHire survey, most U.S. workers are most irritated by a manager who is overbearing and micromanages – qualities that can significantly influence their decision to quit their job.

5. Bosses are above the team; leaders are part of the team.



A boss doesn't take the time to get to know their employees as a leader does. Eisinger said that bosses view their team members as subordinates, while leaders let go of this hierarchical distinction and view their team members as equal contributors.

To be a leader, it's essential to facilitate positive relationships with your employees. Work with their needs and create a culture that encourages open communication.

“By getting to know your team better, you’ll be able to understand how to explain your vision in a way that will really connect with each person,” Macdonald said. “This means you can personalize the way you motivate people.”

She added that good leaders are genuine and loyal, setting an example for their company. “If you lack passion or motivation, odds are your team will too. Don’t be afraid to be human – be real and express your emotions to connect with your workers.”

Key Takeaway



The best [online project management software](#) makes it easier to delegate and track deadlines while avoiding micromanaging.

Are leaders born or made?

The discussion about whether leadership is an innate trait or something that can be learned spans decades. While there’s extensive [research](#) about whether leaders are born or made, the general consensus is that there’s truth to both sides. While some natural abilities – like being collaborative, intelligent, charismatic and compassionate – help professionals emerge as managers, training and experience can transform someone into a true leader. [\[Related article: 6 Tips for Getting Your Team to Work Together\]](#)

Many traits, including stress resistance, the ability to delegate, being responsible and having a respectful management style, can and should be trained and learned.

How to train to be a leader



These are some of the many ways to grow proactively as a leader:

- **Explore management theories.** One way to [become a better leader](#) is by consulting management books and exploring [management theories](#). You can evaluate different management styles and select one that suits you and will benefit your team.
- **Find a coach.** Another way to improve your leadership skills is by enrolling in a coaching program. A good [career coach](#) will help you identify problem areas and employ thought-provoking strategies to help you develop personally and professionally.
- **Find (and become) a mentor.** Unlike a coach, who is usually with you for a short time with a clear agenda in mind, a mentorship relationship is long term. While a mentor can help you, being a mentor can also help improve your leadership skills.

Tip



To **find a mentor**, try exploring your professional network and ask for recommendations. Alternatively, turn to **peer mentoring**, which relaxes the traditionally rigid lines between a mentor and mentee.

To be a good boss or leader, incorporate a few key strategies into your behavior, including thoughtfulness, communication and setting clear expectations for your employees.

- **Be thoughtful.** A good leader conducts their decision-making process based on the team's and company's best interests. Gosnell recommends treating your employees with thoughtfulness. "Leaders who lead for impact think first of their followers. They know that if they are doing what is in the best interest of their followers, it will bring great results for the followers and the organization."
- **Communicate and listen.** Leaders should also incorporate good communication by listening to their teams. Gosnell said that a **listening leader** will hear how to make an organization better through their team's words. "Listening leaders grow in influence and impact, while those who neglect to listen to their team will struggle with disengaged employees who won't listen. A leader who wants to be listened to should practice listening to their people."
- **Set clear expectations.** Whether you see yourself as a boss or a leader, Andrews said, the key to your success is your staff seeing you as fair in your approach toward them. **Set fair, clear employee expectations** and be consistent in your manners so your staff knows what they can expect from you. "This is essential in the workplace, as one of the greatest causes of employee stress is not knowing what to expect from their manager," Andrews said. "Frequent changes in focus and conflicting priorities will leave staff feeling anxious. However, effective communication and a clear goal will ensure that teams all pull in the same direction." [**Learn why effective communication is key to genuine employee engagement.**]

What are a team leader's responsibilities?

Team leaders are responsible for more than just delegating tasks and monitoring employees. They are responsible for the success of the whole team and the success of each team member. An effective team leader should understand each member's strengths, weaknesses and goals, and utilize their talents accordingly.

Eisinger created a brief checklist for leaders when they're determining their primary responsibilities:

- Ensure the team has what they need to get the job done.
- Provide challenging, meaningful work.
- Be accessible and approachable.
- Hold regular one-on-one meetings with each direct report that focus on career development.
- Measure performance.
- Provide regular, ongoing feedback, including [performance reviews](#).

If you do not currently implement all of these responsibilities in your work duties, don't worry. Focus on improving and seek feedback from your team about what you can do better. According to Eisinger, most good leaders start out as bosses.

"In the work I do, it seems to be an inevitable transition point for people as they first step into a supervisory role and develop their leadership capabilities," she said. "It's normal to exhibit some of these 'boss' characteristics. However, it is critical to recognize one's unique challenges and work to overcome them so they can become leaders."

Are you a leader or a boss?



While it can be a strenuous journey from boss to true leader, the rewards are well worth the effort. Being a thoughtful leader can increase your team’s productivity, motivation and loyalty, and ensure your company’s success.

Nadia Reckmann and Sammi Caramela contributed to the writing and reporting in this article. Source interviews were conducted for a previous version of this article.

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