

The Boss and Straw Boss

The common definition of boss is that of a person who is in charge, directs or supervises a worker, group or organization. The word boss has a Dutch origin, and is associated with bastardization. The use of the word became entrenched in the period of slavery in the mid-19th century. The words 'master' and 'massa' were widely used in the days of the history of the sugar cane plantations and the period of colonialism in the Caribbean and Americas. The experiences of the slavery and colonial period, when the master and boss exercised dominant control over human beings who then treated as chattel, have left a historical legacy which remained with generations over the years.

Coming out of the history of slavery and the colonial period history, the word boss carries with it a negative connotation. The titles of master, massa and overseer which formed the management tier during the time of slavery and the plantation system, have long been retired; yet that of boss still remains. It is for this purpose that the use of the words manager, chief, supervisor or superintendent are seemingly preferred to address the head at the level of the enterprise or organization. Although boss has some negativity associated with it, the fact remains that the boss is required to have leadership skills. The boss assumes management responsibility, exercises authority over employees or subordinates and is expected to make decisions.

One problem which employees and members of organizations experience is the display of the straw boss mentality. There are those who are entrusted with a level of responsibility and authority, but who assume unto themselves more power and authority than that which has been entrusted to them. These are those whom are known as straw bosses. Usually, middle management employees who assume positions of supervisor or foreman, find themselves being classed as straw bosses. An employee who performs a supervisory role, should be aware that their remit is to assign and oversee work, enforce the rules, procedures, regulations and policy directives of the enterprise or organization. Every supervisor ought to remain mindful that they have no real discretionary powers. They have no authority to impose any disciplinary action on those they supervise.

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Dr. Dean Schroeder, Associate Dean and Director of Graduate Programmes in Management at the Valparaiso University, Northwest Indiana, advises that “Supervisors are the people directly responsible for coordinating how work gets done, how a company’s goal and strategies are achieved through daily actions, and how routine improvements are accomplished.” Further, Dr. Dean Schroeder pointed out that, “People might be promoted to supervisors because they are the best at their jobs – so that they can solve problems and show others how best their jobs should be done; because they can be trusted to do what they are told by management; or perhaps because of their seniority.”

Bosses must show good communication skills, understanding, judgment and reasoning skills. Adopting the right attitude is extremely important. Being insensitive and adopting the attitude that you must do what I say, will not help the individual as a boss to earn the respect or cooperation of subordinates. This is a recipe for failure, and it will certainly earn the individual the deserving title of ‘Straw Boss.’

There is much to be learnt by those who take on leadership roles as managers or supervisors. The boss is expected to say ‘I’, while the leader says ‘we.’ The leader considers ideas, while the boss puts you down. Leaders help people to grow and develop, while bosses manipulate them. It would seem that bosses know everything and with that, no one can teach them anything. Regrettably, bosses see their role as that as to command and dictate, while leaders extend a helping hand. Bosses abuse and use people. They fail to inspire and motive people. Unfortunately, some would contend that there is a little boss in all us. In an imperfect world, this is a real possibility. It therefore requires that each one does an introspection.

In completing an introspection, each individual should be asking themselves some basic questions. Do I act like a bully? Do I believe I know it all and have all the answers and solutions? Do I show tolerance, compassion, empathy and remorse? Do I look down upon and disrespect others? Do I adopt a dictatorial and authoritarian style of leadership? The findings will help to determine whether an individual is a leader, boss or straw boss.