

Book Review: Being the Boss By Carrie Cavanaugh

When explaining why they wrote Being the Boss: The 3 Imperatives for Becoming a Great Leader, authors Linda A. Hill and Kent Lineback said, “This book is intended for managers who want to make a difference—those who want to be great at working with and leading others” (p.xi). Although this book is not from a specifically Christian perspective, this desire to have your work be meaningful, to not only accomplish great things, but bless those you work with along the way, is what God originally created us for.

This book is more than inspirational, however, it is wonderfully grounded as it recognizes not only the high calling of a leader, but also how hard it is to be one and why. They warn that becoming a great boss, “can be learned, but only if you are willing and able to engage in serious self-development” (p. xi). Recognizing the disparity between what we know and what we actually do, they portray management as, “a matter of will, discipline, and courage that c[an] make demands of us we may not like, demands we c[an] ignore but only at our peril” (p. xv). Furthermore, “becoming an effective manager is an enormous challenge and taking a management course or getting an MBA isn’t sufficient preparation” (p. 4).

The authors point out that, “If you were a star [before being promoted to management], be aware that the

very success that produced your promotion can now work against you” (p. 8). They go on to explain that the skills that enabled stars to do well before are not the same skills needed as a boss. For one thing, you need to learn how to step back and delegate work to others. Also, although your expertise in the field

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will help you, you will now need to learn about motivating others. In fact, “the central question ... address[ed] in Being the Boss is this: How do you exert influence? What do managers actually do to shape and even change the behavior, thoughts, and feelings of others?” Thankfully the book has a wealth of information to help a former star transition into a star of a boss!

These include the Manager’s Three Imperatives—that is the three elements of management that Hill and Lineback have identified as the three essential areas that managers must develop in order to do a great job. They include:

- 1) Manage Yourself
- 2) Manage Your Network
- 3) Manage Your Team

The remainder of the book is organized according to these three aspects of management. And although one or two of them will probably feel second nature to any leader reading the book, there is bound to be at least one area that we shy away from and it is just this area that we need to grow in in order to fulfill our aspirations as a manager.

In the section on Managing Yourself, the authors further break it down into these competencies:

- 1) Technical Competence
- 2) Operational Competence
- 3) Political Competence

For those managers who were previous stars in their field, technical competence won’t be a problem. But while technical competence is about what you know, operational competence is about how to apply it. Political competence is then knowing how to function within your organization because “there’s ‘nothing worse than working for a powerless boss’” (p. 61). Although it may be tempting, “you cannot hunker down and focus on your group and its work alone, because no group can succeed in isolation” (p. 88). This section, along with the other two, is concluded with a series

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of self-evaluation questions that help reinforce the ideas that are covered and help the reader identify specific areas to focus on developing.

One tip Hill and Lineback give is to distinguish between self and role. This helps you to manage outside of personal feelings. Additionally it will free you to grow from the criticism you receive instead of being wounded by them.

One of the more intriguing ideas Hill and Lineback present is under a section entitled “Organizations Generate Conflict—and That’s Not Bad”. One of the points in this section is that diversity and conflict are essential drivers of creativity and innovation. If a manager can really grasp this truth, they can allow those working under them to thrive as the individuals God made them to be.

Typical of the book is the challenge: Can you identify your boss’s strengths? Hill and Lineback suggest that although we are all good at identifying where they fall short, we need to put effort into knowing their strengths in order to best harness those strengths to best accomplish your team’s aims.

One of their most helpful concepts is Hill and Lineback’s designation between a group and a team. They define a team as, “a group of people who do collective work and are mutually committed to a common team purpose and challenging goals related to that purpose” (p. 137) and further, “they share a genuine conviction that all will succeed or

fail together, and that no one can succeed if the team fails” (p. 138). A manager needs to help those under him move from being a group to being a team and his example is the first part of this process—they call it modeling.

In a section entitled “Team Members Need Clarity About How They’re Doing,” Hill and Lineback share some insightful thoughts about the limitations of metrics: “Use metrics whenever you can, but beware of their limitations, two in particular: first, understand what drives them, because they rarely tell the whole story. Costs are up? Why? A one-off cause is one thing, a chronic problem something else. Second, not everything important can be measured. Don’t ignore, for example, team culture and whether the team is living up to its own standards. Also, some goals in your plan may lack numbers because they are still too general, half-baked, or far out in the future. In these cases, judgment is the only yardstick. Don’t hesitate to apply it and ask for others’ opinions” (p. 184). It’s little tips like this that show their years of experience—filling in the gaps that even an MBA miss.

If I were to choose one lesson to take away from the book, it would be Hill and Lineback’s suggested view of their primary task each day. Some managers feel constantly torn away from their work to deal with management issues. Hill and Lineback challenge that paradigm however, “Effective managers don’t do the daily work and their work as managers. They don’t wrest time

from necessary but mundane activities to do what they ‘should’ be doing. They use unplanned daily events, problems, and obligations as vehicles for doing managerial work. Moment by moment, they think about each daily task in the context of the 3 Imperatives and the purpose and goals they’re pursuing” (p. 217).

It is of note that the authors warn, “indeed it is very hard to get honest feedback not only about what you are doing, but also about how you are doing it. The latter is the key to becoming a world-class manager” (p. xii). We at Best Christian Workplaces recognize this important tool for growing into a great boss and that is why we offer our 360 Leadership Review.

These are just some of the nuggets I took away from reading Being the Boss. Depending on your personal strengths and weaknesses as a manager, there may be other things that stand out. And that is one of the values of this book—it is comprehensive, with depth to its topics without bogging the reader down. It is both inspiring and practical. It is clearly well-researched and proven through experience. With the plethora of leadership books on the market today, this one is unmistakably worth the read.