

BUILDING A BETTER BOSS

Google doesn't do anything halfway. So when it decided to "build a better boss," it did what it does best . . . look at data. Using data from performance reviews, feedback surveys, and supporting papers turned in for individuals being nominated for top-manager awards, Google tried to find what a great boss is and does. The project, dubbed Project Oxygen, examined some 100 variables and ultimately identified eight characteristics or habits of Google's most effective managers. Here are the "big eight":

- Provide an unambiguous vision of the future;
- Help individuals to reach their long-term work goals;
- Express interest in employees' well-being;
- Insure you have the necessary technical abilities to support employee efforts;
- Display effective communication skills, especially listening;
- Provide coaching support when needed;
- Focus on being productive and on end results; and
- Avoid over-managing; let your team be responsible.

At first glance, you're probably thinking that these eight attributes seem pretty simplistic and obvious, and you may be wondering why Google spent all this time and effort to uncover these. Even Google's vice president for people operations, Laszlo Bock, said, "My first reaction was, that's it?" Another writer described it as "reading like a whiteboard gag from an episode of The Office." But, as the old saying goes, there was more to this list than meets the eye.

When Bock and his team began looking closer and rank ordering the eight items by importance, Project Oxygen got interesting—a lot more interesting! And to understand this, you have to understand something about Google's approach to management since its founding in 1999. Plain and simple, managers were encouraged to "leave people alone. Let the engineers do their stuff. If they become stuck, they'll ask their bosses, whose deep technical expertise propelled them to management in the first place." It's not hard to see what Google wanted its managers to be—outstanding technical specialists. Mr. Bock explains, "In the Google context, we'd always believed that to be a manager, particularly on the engineering side, you need to be as deep or deeper a technical expert than the people who work for you."

However, Project Oxygen revealed that technical expertise was ranked number eight (very last) on the list. So, here's the complete list from most important to least important, along with what each characteristic entails:

- Provide coaching support when needed (provide specific feedback and have regular one-on-one meetings with employees; offer solutions tailored to each employee's strengths)
- Avoid over-managing; let your team be responsible (give employees space to tackle problems themselves, but be available to offer advice)
- Express interest in employees' well-being (make new team members feel welcome and get to know your employees as people)
- Focus on being productive and on end results (focus on helping the team achieve its goals by prioritizing work and getting rid of obstacles)
- Display good communication skills, especially listening (learn to listen and to share information; encourage open dialogue and pay attention to the team's concerns)
- Help individuals to reach their long-term work goals (notice employees' efforts so they can see how their hard work is furthering their careers; appreciate employees' efforts and make that appreciation known)
- Provide an unambiguous vision of the future (lead the team but keep everyone involved in developing and working towards the team's vision)
- Insure you have the necessary technical abilities to support employee efforts (understand the challenges facing the team and be able to help team members solve problems)

Now, managers at Google aren't just encouraged to be great managers, they know what being a great manager involves. And the company is doing its part as well. Using the list, Google started training managers, as well as providing individual coaching and performance review sessions. You can say that Project Oxygen breathed new life into Google's managers. Bock says the company's efforts paid off quickly. "We were able to have a statistically significant improvement in manager quality for 75 percent of our worst-performing managers."