

Just about managing

How to be a better boss

Tips from “Boss Class”, our new podcast

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WORKPLACES HAVE changed dramatically over the past four years, let alone the past 40. Teams have become more dispersed, thanks to remote work, as well as more diverse. Technology has brought with it great benefits but also constant interruptions, from endless Zoom calls to the ping of another message on Slack. After globalisation spread customers and suppliers around the world, geopolitical tension has made distant relationships seem like a new source of risk.

With each of these shifts, the [job of the manager](#)—the person tasked with getting workers with disparate interests to achieve a common goal—has become harder still. There was a time when managers could cope simply by being technical experts. Now they say they are juggling more tasks and have more activities to co-ordinate. Many report feeling burnt-out, overloaded and confused.

Bosses are rarely the objects of sympathy. In fiction, they are portrayed as cold-hearted (think Ebenezer Scrooge) or weaselly (“If at first you don’t

succeed, remove all evidence you ever tried,” advises David Brent in “The Office”). Yet in real life everyone suffers when management is bad and benefits when it is good. Far more effort is needed to make it better.

Start with how managers affect workers. Roughly a fifth of corporate employees in America are managers, and almost everyone has one. In a survey in ten rich countries, 69% of workers said their boss influenced their mental health as much as their spouse did. Half of Americans who have left a job said they did so because of a bad manager, as did nearly a third of British job-leavers.

Better management does not just mean happier staff. It means better-performing companies, too. Research based on a long-running survey of management techniques across countries has found that well-managed firms tend to be more productive. They also export more and spend more on research and development. Such findings are not mere correlation: a randomised controlled trial in India, for instance, found that increases in management quality caused productivity to rise. And the effect is large. Research by Nicholas Bloom of Stanford University and others concluded that differences in management practices account for a third of the gap in economy-wide productivity between America and the rest of the world.

The prize for better management, then, is big. But how to obtain it? Read enough management books and you might conclude that managers need full-on personality transplants, becoming either Machiavelli’s prince or a Marvel superhero. Study successful managers, though, and the lessons are more prosaic. They are also far more useful—as “[Boss Class](#)”, our new podcast, discovers. Over seven episodes starting this week it will take a wry but practical look at problems facing the modern manager, from meeting etiquette to hiring strategy, while bringing together tips from experts and practitioners alike.

This approach yields several lessons. One is to be explicit about a firm’s processes. Managers should make clear the purpose of a team, what a meeting should achieve and who will take a decision. Meeting agendas at GSK, a British drugs firm, clearly say whether an item is for awareness, to gather participants’ input or intended to yield a decision. Moderna, another drugmaker, lists 12 “mindsets” that define its corporate culture and seeks job

applicants with at least some of them. Such clarity means that everyone knows what they are doing, and why.

Yet management isn't all about accumulating tasks, meetings or processes. A second lesson is that managers can add value by subtracting. Sparing workers from pointless meetings, emails and projects frees them to concentrate on the work that fattens the bottom line. At the start of the year Shopify, an e-commerce firm, deleted 12,000 recurring meetings from its employees' calendars. The useful ones were eventually added back. But the firm says that meetings are down by 14% since the mass deletion. Productivity has gone up by a similar amount.

Good management is a skill. There are too many accidental managers, promoted because they were good at what they did, rather than because they were suited to what lay ahead. Fully 82% of managers told a survey in Britain that they had no proper management skills or training. Providing that training is one way for companies to fill the gap.

Another is to establish two-track promotion systems that offer a way to rise through the ranks without going into management, as Google and Shopify do already. That gives people who either can't or don't want to manage a way to progress. Management should not be something people fall into simply by dint of seniority. The stakes are too high. ■