

## Managing Yourself: The Boss as Human Shield

By Robert I. Sutton

Good leaders protect their employees from lengthy meetings, meddlesome superiors, and a host of other roadblocks to doing real work.

William Coyne headed research and development at 3M—the company behind Ace bandages, Post-it notes, Scotch tape, and other inventions—for over a decade. Shortly after retiring, Coyne spoke to a group of hundreds of executives about innovation at 3M and his own management style. He said he'd started at 3M as a researcher and learned firsthand how well-meaning but nosy executives who proffer too many questions and suggestions can undermine creative work. So when he became head of R&D, he was determined to allow his teams to work for long stretches, unfettered by intrusions from higher-ups. Coyne understood his colleagues' curiosity; if successful, an R&D project could generate millions in new revenue. But he limited their interference (and his own) because, he said, "After you plant a seed in the ground, you don't dig it up every week to see how it is doing."

Coyne knew that the performance of his employees—as well as his career and the company's success—depended on shielding them from threats. This notion that management "buffers" the core work of the company from uncertainty and external perturbations is an old theme in organizational theory, going back at least to James D. Thompson's 1967 classic *Organizations in Action*. The best bosses are committed to letting their workers work—whether on creative tasks such as inventing new products or on routine things such as assembling computers, making McDonald's burgers, or flying planes. They take pride in being human shields, absorbing or deflecting heat from inside and outside the company, doing all manner of boring and silly tasks, and battling idiots and slights that make life harder than necessary on their people.

 Protecting Your People Isn't Always Practical (Located at the end of this article)

As a boss, you can protect your people's backs in seven ways.

### Resist Your Worst Instincts

Great bosses fret about the load they heap on others. The late theater director Frank Hauser said, in his book *Notes on Directing* that during rehearsals he didn't keep "actors hanging about needlessly" because "it demoralizes the entire cast....If they have to wait a half-an-hour, that's life. But if you are really behind, offer them the chance to go away and come back later. And apologize." Hauser advised

focusing on the play, not yourself: “Guard against the director’s first great vice—rabbiting on, making the same point again and again, getting laughs from your inimitable (and interminable) anecdotes.”

Meetings are infamous time wasters. Yes, some are necessary, but bosses bent on self-glorification often run them in disrespectful ways. If you want to grab power and show little regard for your people, arrive late to most meetings. And now and then, show up very late or send word after everyone has gathered that, alas, you are a Very Important Person who is in demand. But if you want your charges to be proud to do good work for you, then start and end meetings on time. You may miss the thrill of petty power displays, but you will earn more prestige by leading productive and grateful followers.

Will Wright, designer of computer games *The Sims* and *Spore*, used Ocean Quigley—a creative, impatient artist who worked for him—as his “canary in the coal mine” at meetings. Wright noted in the *New York Times* that when Quigley asked to be excused, “that was the point at which we always knew that the meeting had hit diminishing returns.” So Wright would simply end it at the canary’s cue. He also used a trick to make his designers think harder about calling unnecessary meetings. When someone booked one, he charged that person a dollar. Wright and his designers still went to many meetings, but he said “it did make them think twice...even though it was only a dollar.”

#### Make It Safe to Fight Right

When people have mutual respect, arguments over ideas are productive and creative. The best bosses orchestrate constructive battles—enabling people to feel safe to speak their minds, even to the leader. Pixar’s Brad Bird, who won Academy Awards for directing *The Incredibles* and *Ratatouille*, is a vigorous advocate of constructive conflict. After a string of blockbusters, starting with *Toy Story*, he was hired by Pixar with a mandate from bosses Steve Jobs, Ed Catmull, and John Lasseter to “mess with our heads, shake it up,” as Bird noted in an interview for *McKinsey Quarterly*. He took their words to heart and assembled a team of “malcontents” to make *The Incredibles*. The team members clashed with one another—but these were good fights, built on mutual trust. Indeed, Bird tells his teams, “I want you guys to speak up and drop your drawers. We’re going to look at your scenes in front of everybody. Everyone will get humiliated and encouraged together.”

Bird’s *Incredibles* team members shook things up as instructed. Pixar’s technical experts initially told them it would take 10 years and cost \$500 million to render the realistic hair, water, and fire they wanted. But Bird and his malcontents pushed the technical team and themselves to invent new methods, which enabled them to complete the film for about \$100 million. It had great commercial success, got rave reviews, and was a source of immense pride for Bird’s team and everyone else at Pixar.

#### Protect Them from External Intrusions and Time Sinks

In his 1975 HBR classic “The Manager’s Job,” Henry Mintzberg wrote: “Someone, only half in jest, once defined the manager as that person who sees visitors so that everyone else can get his work done.” Mintzberg’s observation showed that management work entails dozens—sometimes hundreds—of fragmented tasks per day. If you are a boss, protecting yourself from intrusions may be a lost cause, particularly in the era of e-mail, RSS feeds, and Twitter. But you can run interference for employees,

especially those whose work requires concentration, such as engineers, lawyers, nurses, writers, and other knowledge workers.

Some companies are implementing programs to reduce interruptions and distractions. In 2008, 300 engineers and managers at Intel joined a pilot program in which, for four hours every Tuesday morning, they set their e-mail and IM clients to “offline,” directed phone calls to voice mail, avoided scheduling meetings, and isolated themselves from visitors by putting “Do Not Disturb” signs at the entrances to their workspaces. This “thinking time” program was run by engineer Nathan Zeldes, who reported that it enhanced “effectiveness, efficiency, and quality of life for numerous employees”; 71% of participants recommended that it be extended to other groups.

Good bosses also relieve people of burdensome organizational practices. Consider Bonny Simi, a three-time U.S. Olympic luger, a commercial pilot, and now a director at JetBlue. In 2008, as head of airport planning and industrial engineering, she and her team overhauled their performance-review process. With support from senior leaders, they scrapped the team’s old evaluation form, which took two hours to complete and required much back-and-forth between boss and employee. They replaced it with a form that takes 20 minutes to fill out. Similarly, under new CEO Ed Whitacre, GM slashed the number of regular reports prepared by its research group from 94 to four. Now the group can spend more time on research.

#### Defy Idiocy from On High

Simi had backing from her superiors at JetBlue. But sometimes good bosses face senior leaders and powerful groups that cram bad ideas down everyone’s throat. When your people’s performance or well-being is threatened by idiocy from on high, you need to decide whether to comply or resist, depending on what will help them—and you—most. Sometimes the political costs of defiance are too high, and sometimes seemingly idiotic directives turn out to be useful.

That said, defiance can occasionally be the best strategy. In the mid-1980s, I saw this tactic used in a large retail chain that was closing over 100 stores. The Retail Action Team that oversaw the process—jokingly called the “Rat Patrol” by its members—asked me to study eight closings: four deemed “good” and four “bad,” depending on how much business the company retained. When I conducted interviews at these stores, I found that managers responsible for “good” closings rarely followed the Rat Patrol’s procedures. One “good” manager held up his thick corporate manual and bragged that the secret to his success was ignoring it and other instructions from the Rat Patrol. When people at his branch planned a party to say good-bye to one another, the Rat Patrol instructed the manager to cancel it, but he approved it anyway. All the hugs, promises to stay in touch, and stories at the party lifted their spirits and gave them a sense of closure. Managers of the “bad” closings, in contrast, tried to follow the Rat Patrol’s guidelines closely. All complained that doing so demoralized employees and made it difficult to persuade customers to transfer accounts to other stores. The upshot was that managers who ignored and defied their superiors’ instructions were judged as most effective by those same superiors.

#### Practice Creative Incompetence and Malicious Compliance

Your parents probably taught you that anything worth doing is worth doing well. Mine did. Yet at times good bosses do a half-assed job on purpose and encourage followers to join them. Creative incompetence was popularized by *The Peter Principle*, a brilliant business parody from the 1960s. The authors, Laurence J. Peter and Raymond Hull, weren't joking when they argued for the virtues of doing lousy work intentionally, albeit in small doses and with proper precautions. Good bosses focus their people's effort on what matters most. When relatively trivial demands can't be ignored, the best option is sometimes to do a quick, crummy job and move on to more-crucial issues.

Jeffrey Pfeffer and I encountered multiple examples of creative incompetence when we gathered material at a large bank for our book *The Knowing-Doing Gap* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2000). We had an especially memorable chat with a branch manager whom senior executives had identified as among the top performers in New York City. This manager believed that the balanced scorecards he and others in his branch had to complete for direct reports were useless—after all, they were rewarded for short-term financial performance, not the 25 or so dimensions on the form. But balanced scorecards were among the CEO's pet projects, and compliance was closely monitored. So the manager simply completed the cards in a cursory manner and encouraged his colleagues to do the same.

Malicious compliance, in contrast, refers to following idiotic orders from on high to the letter, thereby assuring the work will suck. One manager at an electronics firm described how his team had built an ugly, cumbersome product prototype as ordered by his boss, the VP of engineering. After it was savaged by the CEO, the manager explained (with documentation) that he had adamantly opposed the idea but had given up battling the VP. When the VP lost his job, the manager's team members redesigned the product "the right way" and created a commercial success. Beware, however, that malicious compliance can be destructive. But it does work, as a last resort, under the right conditions.

### Slay—or Slow—Their Enemies

My previous book highlighted how mean-spirited, abusive people can undermine attitudes and performance. A good boss protects followers from these destructive characters. Consider an incident that a Texas police sergeant told me about: "I was given your book by my supervisor to read so we could 'discuss' leadership ideas. I thought this was a little odd, as I could best describe my boss's style as leadership by oppression. I began to read the book and realized that he had made a colossal mistake....[I ended up] telling him, in front of eight of my subordinates that I supervise, that his behavior of verbally berating officers was not acceptable on my shift. I actually said to him, 'It's your fault! You gave me *The No Asshole Rule* book!'" By the way, if you do something like this, you had better have rock-solid job security, powerful friends, or another job offer.

Good bosses also protect their people from demeaning, overly demanding, and frustrating clients and customers. Executives from several airlines, including Southwest and JetBlue, have told me that their companies ban consistently or outrageously abusive passengers from buying tickets. Ann Rhoades, former head of "People" at Southwest, described how a fellow executive earned the loyalty of several gate agents by interrupting a nasty customer, telling the jerk that he wouldn't permit his people to be treated that way, and then marching him to an American Airlines counter to buy him another ticket.

## Take the Heat

One female executive I know had a subordinate who made a mistake that cost the company a lot of money. Yet when the board lambasted her, she didn't blame him. "I let him hide behind my skirts because when you are the boss, part of your job is to protect your people when they screw up," she explained.

For a similar reason, former New York Yankees manager Joe Torre was beloved by his coaches and players. When the late owner George Steinbrenner became too pushy or critical, Torre deflected the pressure from them to himself. As Torre reports in *The Yankee Years*, Steinbrenner invited himself to a meeting of the coaches the afternoon before a playoff game and was driving them nuts by second-guessing decisions. Torre ended these antics by shouting, "Get out of there, George! Don't fuck them up." Steinbrenner laughed and left, but he warned Torre: "You just better be ready." As usual, Torre took the heat for his coaches and players. He responded, "I'll be ready, George. I'll be ready." Covering for employees can be painful and risky for a boss, but it can be remarkably effective. It engenders loyalty by demonstrating that you aren't just spewing out hollow rhetoric about trying to protect them.

## Self-Awareness Is the Key

Good bosses shield their employees from distress and distraction in diverse ways, whether behind the scenes or publicly. They work day after day to enhance their self-awareness; stay in tune with followers' worries, hot buttons, and quirks; and foster a climate of comfort and safety. They also learn to identify which battles their people consider crucial to fight, and which they see as unimportant. When bosses can't protect people—for example, from layoffs, pay cuts, or tough assignments—the best ones convey compassion, do small things to allay fears, and find ways to blunt negative consequences. Operating in this way helps bolster your people's performance and well-being. And a nice by-product is that they will have your back, too.

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## Protecting Your People Isn't Always Practical

### Read the Executive Summary

The best bosses shield their people from disruption and distress, but they aren't martyrs who always put employee performance and happiness first. Wise leaders balance the need to protect their people against other, sometimes more crucial, considerations.

## Political Power

If your immediate reaction is to fight for your people without considering the effect on your influence and reputation, you're undermining your own power. That, in turn, does you and your team a disservice.

One boss, a director of sports medicine at a large university, took pride in battling misguided procedures and vindictive senior administrators to shield his people. Yet he picked his fights carefully, because if he developed a reputation as a chronic complainer—or, worse, got fired—he couldn't protect anyone. He asked his people to heed the rules and administrators unless defiance was crucial to maintaining their performance or dignity. As he put it, "My job is to open the umbrella when the crap rains down from above. Your job is to keep me from having to open it too often."

### Rotten Apples

A fact of organizational life for most bosses is that no matter how hard you work to build a great team, you will hire or be assigned some weak and destructive people. Your job is, of course, to help them learn and improve. If they don't change, however, it's best to send them packing.

Research by Will Felps and his colleagues on "bad apples" bolsters this point. They identified three kinds of destructive characters, whom I call deadbeats ("withholders of effort"), downers (who "express pessimism, anxiety, insecurity, and irritation"), and assholes (who violate "interpersonal norms of respect"). Felps estimates that, compared to teams without bad apples, those with just one suffer a performance disadvantage of 30% to 40%. Rotten apples sap time and energy that could be devoted to useful tasks. Their negativity is also contagious—it infects coworkers, turning them into deadbeats, downers, and assholes just like them.

### Your Own Well-Being

Good bosses balance their followers' needs for protection with their own needs. They treat the job like a marathon, not a sprint. Bosses who never tend to their own mental and physical health, families' needs, and careers are doomed to failure. If you don't take time away from work to recharge, you will eventually burn out.

My wife, Marina Park, a hardworking boss for decades, first as managing partner of a large law firm and now as CEO of Girl Scouts of Northern California, uses the airplane safety analogy: Secure your own oxygen mask before helping others. After all, if you're choking for air, you can't save someone else. Similarly, if you as a boss are not breathing freely, you can't clear the air for others.

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