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## What Makes a Good Boss?

*Recognizing some key characteristics can help you find a boss who is right for you.*

The person to whom you report is at least as important to your career satisfaction and progression as the organization where you work. No matter how progressive and enlightened the organization's human resources policies and no matter how cutting edge the organization's strategy, it is your boss who is the face of the organization to you. A good boss can:

- improve your quality of work life
- facilitate your performance
- act as an important determinant of your career advancement
- encourage you to take on more challenging tasks and greater levels of responsibility

But what is a "good boss," exactly? While personal preferences will determine in part how you regard your boss (and how your subordinates regard you), following are some characteristics that you should look for in a boss. These characteristics can be a useful guide for understanding and improving your relationship with your current boss, as well as evaluating potential bosses as you move into new positions. When you are ready to concentrate on your own supervisory skills, you can use this

list to perform a self-evaluation and identify development areas.

**Technically competent.** Your boss should have the skills (e.g., accounting, business planning, marketing, human resources management) necessary to do his own work while also directing and evaluating your work. Ideally, your boss will have worked in your position or a similar one at some time in his career.

**A person of integrity.** Do your boss's actions match her words? Does she carry out the policies and reflect the values of the organization? To earn the trust of subordinates and the respect of peers, bosses must be forthright and honorable.

**Emotionally intelligent.** A boss's emotional intelligence is often the key to good relationships with subordinates. Look for these five main characteristics of emotional intelligence in your boss:

1. **Self-awareness** is the ability to recognize and understand one's own moods, emotions, and drives, as well as their effect on others. You'll know your boss is self-aware if he is confident, can make realistic assessments of his own strengths and weaknesses, is willing to admit mistakes and apologize, and has the ability to laugh at himself.

2. **Self-regulation** is the ability to control and redirect disruptive impulses and moods. Does your boss remain calm in the midst of crisis? Is she able to deal with conflict? A good boss will think before she acts and stay in control of her emotions.

3. **Motivation** expresses itself as a passion to work for reasons that go beyond money and status. If your boss is motivated, he will pursue goals with energy and persistence, seek to exceed expectations, and remain optimistic when faced with challenges.

4. Bosses who exhibit **empathy** understand the emotional makeup of others. Your boss should demonstrate an ability to develop her subordinates; she should be sensitive to the cultural differences among her staff and should care about others' needs.

5. Bosses with strong **social skills** are effective in building and managing relationships. If your boss is able to find common ground and build rapport with a wide range of people and points of view, he has strong social skills.

**Intellectually energetic and curious.**

Good bosses are lifelong learners. They see every situation as a learning opportunity and every person as someone from whom they can learn. Belonging to professional associations, teaching seminars, or serving on committees are all good indications that your boss is intellectually energetic and curious.

**A skilled mentor.** While bosses may not mentor each and every one of their subordinates, they should fulfill

at least some mentoring needs within the organization. When evaluating your boss's mentoring abilities, keep in mind that mentoring relationships can serve two functions: career functions, which assist a junior colleague's advancement up the organizational hierarchy, and psychosocial functions, which contribute to a junior colleague's sense of self-worth and confidence. Your boss's mentoring skills may be stronger in one of these areas.

**Responsible and accountable.** Does your boss willingly take the heat when challenged, or does she pass the blame onto others? A good boss listens broadly and intently to other opinions and information before making decisions, but ultimately accepts accountability for the consequences of the decision.

#### How Do You Find a Good Boss?

Once you know what characteristics to look for in a good boss, you still face the challenge of finding one—the supply of good bosses is never as great as the demand. When considering a new position, research your potential boss just as you would research the potential employer organization. Following are some questions you might want to explore.

- What are this person's technical qualifications? How long has he or she been in the position? Does he or she have a reputation as an "expert" in the field?
- Is this a person you can trust? Is this person known for his or her honesty and integrity?
- Would others with whom this person has worked (or supervised) characterize him or her as "emotionally

intelligent"? Does this person exhibit self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills?


- Does this person have a personal, demonstrated commitment to life-long learning? Is he or she affiliated with the American College of Healthcare Executives or other professional groups? Is he or she progressing in the credentialing processes of these groups?
- Does this person seek feedback on his or her own performance from subordinates and colleagues?
- Do you (and other professional colleagues) respect and admire this person? Would you want others to associate you with this person?
- Does this person have a reputation for developing subordinates? What has happened to the careers of people who have worked for him or her?
- Is this person willing to take responsibility and be accountable for decisions, particularly the hard, risky ones?

In addition to asking these questions of yourself, contact people in and outside the organization to obtain information about your potential boss's management style and career history. Ask the same questions of several people to see if you get consistent answers about the person's character and behavior. If the person is an ACHE affiliate, you can learn about his or her career progression and affiliate status by consulting the online ACHE Affiliate Directory. And don't be afraid to ask your potential boss questions during the interview process that will tell you something about his or her leadership philosophy and values.

A boss's impact on your work life and career are too important to leave to chance. With the right research and evaluation, however, you can improve your chances of finding a boss who will support you while also challenging you to grow and develop your own supervisory skills. ▲

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