
Great Leaders and Strange Bosses

By Lothar Katz

Over the nearly twenty years of my corporate career, I had about fifteen supervisors. Sometimes there was only one boss; at other times, I was in matrix organizations, reporting to two or three different individuals. These bosses originated from several different countries: China, France, Germany, Iran, Taiwan, the United States, and, err, Texas, which according to some is an altogether different place. ☺

Who was the strangest of these individuals? I'm not telling. [After all, he may be reading this column!]

To be sure, I have always been, and still am, very grateful to all of these people for having taught me something of value. To me, learning from the examples of others is the surest way to develop oneself. At the same time, some of these bosses made my life harder than it needed to be, for which I am, well, let's just say, **less** grateful.

What strikes me when reflecting on these individuals, however, is something else: how different their styles were and what that taught me about different interpretations of what constitutes a good leader.

Over the years, I had tough U.S.-American bosses and not-so-tough ones. One of the greatest leaders to whom I had the pleasure to report was a West Point (U.S. Military Academy) graduate. His style was as far as could be from any cliché that might come to mind here (well, at least to mine): rather than the military-style take-no-prisoners commander I expected, he was a friendly and sociable character with an unobtrusive, highly participatory leadership style. When needed, however, he knew when to stand his ground and remain firm in the face of adversity. As I compared his style to those of other U.S.-American bosses I had over the years, I noticed similarities, yet also aspects that set him apart. Where others pretended to let their subordinates in on their decision making, he was genuinely inviting; where others became tense when challenged, even combative, his reactions reflected an assertiveness that always left room for a genuine curiosity in discovering others' viewpoints.

At other points during my career, I was lucky enough to work with/for a few more great leaders. And then, there were the more mediocre bosses: those whose self-importance dominated their actions, those who seemed disinterested in their own jobs and mine, and one who was outright psychotic. All of which simply reminded me that great leadership takes a certain set of qualities not everyone develops.

What I discovered in parallel were patterns of cultural bias. Across different nationalities, differences in leadership styles stood out that clearly went beyond individual preferences. "Participatory though not necessarily inclusive" was a common experience with most of my U.S. managers. In contrast, those from China, Iran, or Taiwan all showed notable authoritarian and somewhat paternalistic tendencies. Challenging my German bosses was far easier than doing so has ever been with any of my U.S. ones, which reflects a common characteristic of Germany's more egalitarian business culture. Calling the French executive to whom I reported for a while "inclusive" would be, well, pushing the truth a bit. In a rather aloof style, he kept to himself and shared information only sparingly, as is indeed common with managers in France.

While some were more adaptable than others, I think it fair to say that the original culture of everyone I ever reported to was apparent in the ways they presented themselves as leaders. What fascinated me was that the dividing line between the great and the not-so-great leaders had little or nothing to do with cultural orientations. Maybe the French executive was less inclusive, but this was offset by his decisiveness and positive attitude. Maybe to Western standards the Chinese was overly authoritarian, but his vision and integrity nevertheless instilled deep trust and inspired those working for him.

As Wharton professor Robert J. House put it in one of his books, “Vision, foresight, providing encouragement, trustworthiness, dynamism, positiveness, and proactivism are universally valued leadership characteristics.” Indeed, these traits are valued by, say, Chinese employees as much as they are by U.S.-American ones.

In a world where team members from all over the planet are commonplace, that is good news. If your globalized job left you uncertain about how to adjust your own style to employees from different countries, don’t despair: it is not all that important how your personal traits or cultural preferences influence you as a leader.

Yes, culture-specific expectations matter and you will benefit greatly from paying attention to those of the people you lead. When push comes to shove, however, what matters most will be those of your leadership behaviors that are universally powerful, regardless of whether they come dressed up as soft or tough, humble or assertive. Great leadership may come in many disguises—but we all “know it when we see it,” regardless of our own cultural background.

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