



# Stanford eCorner

## Hallmarks of Great Bosses

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Stanford professor and author Bob Sutton covers a number of hallmarks and strategies of smart, in-tune bosses. While traditional management theory dictates constant monitoring of employees and processes, this may not be the best tactic, says Sutton. His research reports this is particularly true for bosses managing creative teams and employees. In these situations, over-management can backfire, often stifling creativity and innovation.



### Transcript

What I want to do now is to turn to sort of the hallmarks of in-tuned bosses. So these are some of the main things that you as a boss have to do to be effective, to be in tune with people, and some of the main ideas in the book. The first one is being perfectly assertive. So there's this kind of cool literature and one of the main researchers here is a guy named Frank Flynn at the Stanford Business School. And what they find is that when they do surveys of a boss--so "Would you want to work for the boss again?" "Who would you like to be like?" "Did the best make you do your best work?" things like that--the thing that starts coming out in a number of studies, more powerful than charisma, by the way, is the notion that the best bosses are rated woefully average by their followers in terms of things like assertiveness. And some of the measures you can see here: competitive, aggressive, passive. And it's not that the best bosses are medium all the time. Rather, what it is is the best bosses have that ability to sort of turn up the volume, to be pushy, to get in people's faces when they need it, maybe to give them some negative feedback, and to back off when it's the right time to do that as well. So this, again, this notion of being in-tune with what it feels like to work for you, and also being in tune with the needs of the person they're supervising and the group that they're leading. This will teach you.

All right. So...anyhow. So 26 years as an Engineering professor and I can't operate a remote control. Thank you, Forrest. You might-- OK. So this leads us to Tommy Lasorda. Tom Byers and I were just saying the only time we've seen each other lately is the Giants game, so we're sort of out of practice in being a Giants fan. I hate Tommy Lasorda, but he had a great quote the first day that he took over as manager of the Dodgers, which was, "I believe managing is like holding a dove in your hand: if you hold it too tightly, you'd kill it; if you hold it too loosely, you lose it." And that is, to me, a pretty good capture of this notion that you've got to know when to push and you've got to know when to back off. All right. So one thing that is I think important to emphasize here of this notion of being in tune is a generous part of being a good boss, since ETL is about creative work, it's especially, I think, important to emphasize that when you lead people who do creative work, that's especially a time when 'first, do no harm' is especially important.

There's a lot of research that shows that when you watch people more closely, when you ask them more questions and you constantly evaluate them, which is by the way the way that most people in Silicon Valley seem to act as bosses--they send you the emails every 10 minutes to see how things are going--that that stifles creativity. And the reason it stifles creativity is creativity entails a lot of failure, a lot of long stretches of uncertainty, and when you start asking people more questions and evaluating them more often and giving them more frequent milestones, they start going to the tried and true so they don't screw up in front of the boss. So this notion of management by getting out of the way, one of my favorite examples is--you ever had David Kelley of IDEO speak at ETL? You must have. So David Kelley, one of my heroes, founder of the d.school and founder of IDEO--I guess, according to Tom, I should say I'm a co-founder with him at the d.school but, really, it's David's deal, as it

should be. David is the master of what I call 'management by walking out of the room'. He does this thing, and I've probably seen him do this 50 times in my life where he'll sort of convene a meeting, and if things are going badly he'll stay in the front of the room for quite a while, but if things go well, what he does is he walks to the back of the room and then he walks out. Because he's of the opinion, though, while David is as nice and mellow a leader as you've ever met in lots of ways, that the fact he's an authority figure can sort of mess things up. So that's somebody who sort of acts like this. And my favorite quote here--I once did a panel with Bill Coim, who led R&Dat 3M for over a decade--"After you plant a seed in the ground, you don't dig it up every week to see how it's doing." And one of the problems with ethos of management, again, there's this sort of myth that the more we're in people's faces, the better they're going to do.