



Stanford eCorner

A Good Boss or a Bad Boss?

Bob Sutton, *Stanford University*

November 10, 2010

Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/2572/A-Good-Boss-or-a-Bad-Boss>

According to author Bob Sutton, interviews are terrible predictors of what is going to happen in a working environment. However, there are some indicators to look for to determine if a prospective supervisor will be pleasant and effective. For example, listen to the number of "I's" versus "we's" the prospective employer uses when describing a project, advises Stanford Professor Bob Sutton. Are they a team player? Will they offer credit to others? An even better strategy is to find former employees and ask them about their day-to-day experience with the supervisor in question.



Transcript

Can you give me like a couple of questions that I could ask of a potential boss-- Oh! --to find out whether they are a good boss? So the question is, how do you interrogate your boss? Well, the first thing is, my first reaction to that is, don't believe a word they say. It's just like an employment interview. Most of you are younger. You know you can bullshit your way through the employment interview and then get the job. Interviews are terrible predictors of what's actually going to happen. I went and said, "Look, circle around." So one of the things I look for is, first of all, the 'I' versus 'we' thing sounds silly, but when they keep saying "I" rather than "we" I always take that as a bad sign. And the other thing is, look for descriptions of a project and see whether they're always putting themselves in the position of taking the most credit. Because that means they're going to do it to you, right? And then the other thing that I would look for besides those things, and Tina and I have actually talked about this a lot, is if you possibly can, find somebody who used to work for them and pull them aside and interrogate them. In fact, in the no-asshole rule, I've got an example. This is actually of my wife.

My wife used to be an attorney; now she is CO of the Northern California Girl Scouts. But about seven years into her 25-year career as an attorney, she got offered a job--and I've got to be careful--by a very famous litigation attorney. And this was towards the end of her career in litigation and she was going to go work for him. And what she did was... She was all excited. He was really famous, he was involved in a really famous lawsuit. And what she did was, she was about ready to go work for him, but then she found a guy who had just quit and she called him up and talked to him. And apparently this attorney was a complete asshole, horrible to associates, verbally abusive. So she called him up and said that, "I'm not going to take the job." So he started pushing and he said, "Why?" and she said, "Well, I talked to people who worked for you and understand you're difficult to work with." He started screaming at her and threatening her. So this sort of confirmed what was happening.

There's really an unfortunate footnote to this, by the way. This person who is described in the no-asshole rule came up to me after a talk--actually it was at one of those always-on talks--and told me what a great book "The No Asshole Rule" was. And he's in it!