

# Bosses Do Know What They Like

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## 7 Behaviors That Define The Best And Worst Employees

by Joe Folkman

Most people can make broad generalized attributions about others from small actions. Recently my wife commented that, “I never close our closet doors!”

My response was, “Never? Surely I must have done it a few times by accident.”

To which she then responded, “Nope, you have NEVER closed a door.”

The reality is that I close the door most of the time, but occasion-

ally I leave it open. (At least that is my reality.) The point here is that often people will make broad general attributions about another person’s effectiveness, e.g., they are terrible at everything, from a few behaviors that capture their attention. I wanted to do some research on which behaviors are most likely to capture the attention of your manager—in other words what matters most to your boss.

To answer the question, I looked at a data set of over 100,000 managers and their ratings of direct reports. They rated them on a set of 60 behaviors that effectively differentiate great from poor leaders. To make this a more scientific study, I randomly selected 50% of the managers and identified the group in the bottom quartile and compared them to the group in the top quartile based on their overall effectiveness ratings. By looking at top rated behaviors of the best leaders, and seeing the lack of those same behaviors in the worst leaders, we were able to find which skills were most desirable to a boss.

The analysis uncovered seven behaviors that matter the most to individual managers.

**1. Inspires and Motivates Others.** When we asked managers which competency was more critical, the majority choose drives for results. This seems to be the table stakes for anyone in a leadership position, but when we looked at what differentiates high and low performers the best, it is inspiring and motivates others. We often refer to

drives for results as “Push” and inspires and motivates as “Pull.” Most every leader comes prepared to push (e.g., set deadlines and hold others accountable), but inspiring and motivating is much harder. It is the lowest rated of the 19 competencies but ranked as the most important by direct reports. Most people can bark orders, but getting others excited and motivated to achieve exceptional results is rare and highly valued.

**2. Establishes Stretch Goals.** Leaders who were skilled at getting others to go beyond what they originally thought possible were rare and in short supply. This is very different than simply focusing on results. Many people have a difficult time getting others to take on a very challenging goal. They worry that pushing others hard to accomplish difficult objectives will negatively impact the engagement of direct reports, but our data suggests the opposite. When people accomplish difficult objectives, their engagement increases even more. While most people resist taking on

challenging goals, when they do and are successful, they feel more confident in their abilities and in the organization’s potential success.

- 3. Strategic Perspective.** When teams are not clear about the team and the organization’s strategy and direction, they need to rely on constant direction from the team leader. Leaders who help clarify the strategy and ensure that everyone knows where they are headed can empower the team to lead themselves. Perhaps when leaders do not share the strategy with the team it is because they lack clarity themselves.
- 4. Integrity and Trust.** Those leaders whose managers felt they walked their talk and acted as role models were more highly valued. They were trusted, and their managers were confident that if they said something would be done, it would be done.
- 5. Interpersonal Skills.** Interpersonal skills are important for every leader. One behavior that rose to the top of the list was the ability to provide coaching and acting



as a mentor to others. Some leaders prefer to act independently, but leaders who were more effective at generating a high level of cooperation with people in other parts of the organization were more highly valued by their managers. Leaders who were active at communicating were also highly valued.

- 6. Takes Initiative.** Those leaders who wait to be told what to do will never be as highly valued as the leaders who see what needs to be done and do it.
- 7. Leads Change.** Change is hard, and many leaders resist making changes. Leaders that recognize situations where change is needed are significantly more highly valued by their managers. It takes courage to make a difficult change that will improve the organization, but managers highly value leaders who demonstrate this skill.

### Managing Your Manager

As I simulated the impact of improvement on these seven dimensions, I was surprised at the increase it had on how a leader

was perceived. Listed below are three different strategies.

#### Be Great at One

By developing any one of these behaviors to the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile, your overall leadership effectiveness rating from your manager goes up to the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile.

#### Be Very Good at Two

By developing any two of these behaviors to the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile your overall leadership effectiveness rating from your manager goes to the 71<sup>st</sup> percentile.

#### Be Above Average at Five

By developing any five of these behaviors to above average your overall leadership effectiveness rating from your manager goes to the 66<sup>th</sup> percentile.

Our recommendation is for you to start with the one behavior you feel would help you be more effective in your current job—the one you have the most passion and energy to improve. Any effective improvement effort needs to start with a good baseline of current performance. I encourage you to participate in a 360-degree leadership assessment to evaluate your current level of strengths and weaknesses.

## The 7 Behaviors that Matter Most

1. Inspires and Motivates Others
2. Establishes Stretch Goals
3. Strategic Perspective
4. Integrity and Trust
5. Interpersonal Skills
6. Takes Initiative
7. Leads Change

## About Us

Zenger Folkman relentlessly seeks to rise above the inconsistent, and sometimes misleading, nature of popular leadership philosophies and beliefs brought on by opinion. The discipline of leadership and those who pursue it deserve better. Our most valuable asset is the expertise of combining hard data and statistical analysis with logical explanations and actionable application that help individual leaders thrive and organizations succeed.

