

CHAPTER THREE

SURVIVING YOUR BOSS: WE ALL HAVE TO REPORT TO SOMEONE

ADAM WAS MY MANAGER when I got my first job as a project director in a survey research company. I was just out of college and didn't know anything about market research. He was the most nurturing boss you could imagine and was extremely kind and patient. As an entry level individual, most of my training was through hands-on, one-on-one, on the job training rather than formal classes. I sat in Adam's cubical, squished in against the wall next to him, as he showed me how to write questionnaires and analyze data. He was always supportive but he also provided critical feedback, when I needed it.

One day, I was writing a tabulation plan by hand, preparing data for delivery to our computer programmers. I found this kind of work easy and somewhat mindless to write. After completing the plan, I proudly showed it to Adam.

“This is very neatly done and your handwriting is perfect,” He replied. “But the work is perfunctory. I don't feel you put any real thought into it. I know you can do better. Why don't you give it another try?”

Looking back, even though Adam's message was hard to hear, he was on target and shared his feedback from a caring place. A few months later, we were compiling the results of a Coke versus Pepsi taste test (yes, really!). I checked all the tabulations against the plan, made sure the numbers added up just right, and prepared to mail the final results to the client. Then, Adam asked me which brand had won. I was mortified. In my diligence to check all the numbers, I lost sight of the most important finding. Adam explained that while it is important to make sure the information is accurate, it's even more critical to step back and see if the data makes sense. I needed to be careful not to get stuck in the weeds, and, as they say, "miss the forest for the trees." Since then, I always make an effort to focus on the big picture and ask: "What?" (what are the facts?), "So What?" (what does it mean?) and "Now What?" (what should we do about it?).

In the 1980s, conventional wisdom said you shouldn't stay at your first job for more than two years. My father was a big believer in this, so when I hit that point he pushed me to move on. His theory was if you start somewhere as a junior person, people will never take you seriously. And as wonderful as Adam was, my dad was right. When I hit that two-year mark, I started to feel stifled. I had changed and grown, but Adam treated me the same. He still expected me to spend all my time with him. I wanted to make more connections with people, so I'd try to walk around and talk with others, but if I was away from my desk for a few minutes, he'd page me. I can still hear it over the loud speaker: "Karyn Schoenbart, please call extension 286." Adam was a micromanager who always had to know where I was and what I was doing. It was clear he wasn't allowing me to be more independent. Sadly, I realized that to keep developing, I needed to move on.

Adam didn't take my departure well. He was very hurt, and we lost touch. When I was working for him, I thought Adam was the best manager I could possibly have. But in retrospect, I think I was wrong. The best managers not only mentor and teach, but they also encourage their direct reports to grow.

In my next job, I worked for a small market research company that was expanding. I was hired because I had experience they were looking for to launch a new business. My office wasn't really an office at all—it was a warehouse where one of the owners (my boss) and I would work. After the new venture was up and running, we'd move into the headquarters with the other employees, but until then, my boss and I were on our own.

This was a completely different experience from the one with Adam. My new manager, Seth, had his heart set on hiring one particular person who used to work for him, but she was unwilling to relocate and reneged on the job. After working for Adam, who adored me, I was in culture shock with this new boss who barely even wanted me! Seth also had very little time for me, since it was just the two of us responsible for getting this venture up and running. He'd basically tell me what needed to be done, and I was expected to take care of it. Since he didn't have time to give me a lot of direction, I needed to figure it out on my own. It was the opposite of nurturing.

But here's the kicker: at this stage in my career, Seth's approach was exactly what I needed! After being micromanaged for so long, it was scary, but also liberating. I had to make my own schedule, determine how and what to get done, and most challenging of all, how to assess myself while my boss was busy doing more important things.

Today's twenty-somethings expect a lot of feedback because they are always striving to learn and grow. I felt that way too, but since I wasn't getting much input from Seth, what could I do? I had no choice but to figure it out myself and take ownership of my own development.

Lists became an essential way to manage my time. I'd learned from Adam to focus on the big picture and not just the small tasks. So, in addition to listing out daily tasks, I also set short, medium, and long-term goals to evaluate my progress. Since I was accustomed to constant feedback, this was a big change and a tremendous learning experience. It forced me to grow in a whole new way.

Who was the better boss, Adam or Seth? Adam was certainly more of a mentor and teacher. But as your career develops, you don't always need the mentor-manager. Sometimes, you need to learn for yourself. Throughout my career, I've had nurturing, involved managers, but I've also had hands-off ones. The truth is, both types are important.

Later in my career, I worked for a woman named Linda. She was a happy medium between Adam and Seth, a nurturing type that also supported me in expanding my responsibilities. We enjoyed working together for 15 years. While this was one of the more positive experiences in my career, I must admit I probably worked for Linda too long. There comes a point when a relationship gets stale and you need someone new to push you in different ways. When I switched divisions, and moved on from Linda, I was re-energized and my learning curve was steep but rewarding.

Words of Wisdom

“Just work really, really hard. It’s amazing how good life is if you work hard. Second, set goals. Goals are free. Success is about staying hungry, and setting a goal is a way of creating hunger.”

—Bracken Darrell, CEO, Logitech.