Be the Boss Everyone Wants to Work For

A Guide for New Leaders

By

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the 297 new leaders who were part of my research, the literally millions of entry-level and first-level supervisors, managers, and directors on the frontlines, and everyone who is, or will about to be, a new leader. You can be the boss everyone wants to work for.
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Introduction: The Biggest First in Your Professional Career

Firsts. There are many “firsts” in our lives. First date. First kiss. First concert. First car. First album or CD (or mp3) you bought and listened to. First time leaving home. First time “with” someone if you catch my meaning. First heartbreak. First child’s birth. Think about them. I bet you remember a lot about those or other important “firsts” in your life.

Here’s another “first” – your promotion into your first managerial role, the first formal leadership position you’ve ever had. All you’ve known in your career is work, work, work. And you were crushing it. The reward? You’re a boss for the first time in your life.

Think about your own story. Do you remember when you heard the news and found out that for the first time in your life, you’d be leading others? How did it make you feel? Did you feel like this new leader, an engineer by trade?

Throughout your early years of employment you always questioned leadership. You continually ask questions like “Why can't we do it this way?” or "What are they thinking?” or "Is it really that hard to just do it?" When you become a leader, you’ll quickly realize why these questions aren’t easy and why things were done a certain way. You’ll be in charge of employees, which is a great thing. But you also have to answer to a different group, a group with "grown-up" agendas who knows this business inside and out. They may question whether they made the right choice in promoting you. This group, which now includes you, will lead the future of the company and they have certain processes that need to be followed or things don't happen. These processes are usually the answer to why things are done a certain way and you just didn’t know all that was going on as an individual contributor.

With all this said...I’m the youngest of a new generation of leaders. Deep down, I know there is room for improvement, that some processes could use a change. Change happens for a reason, and I’m not afraid to be that reason.

Or maybe this new leader’s story is more like yours:
I was sitting in my Vice President’s office. It was a Friday. I gave “the business case” for the raise I felt I deserved. Stating how indispensable I was, how my skills were unique, and presenting the evidence supporting the impact I made on our department and the bottom-line, it all worked like I planned. Finally, I was going to get that raise I had been asking for all this time. I never felt so vindicated. Then it comes:

“You know, one of the key areas of focus for the executive team in our organization is developing top talent. We’ve always thought that you’d be a great manager. You and I have talked about this before in passing, and you always said, ‘Now’s just not the right time.’ But I really think that with this raise comes more responsibility. Isn’t it time that you step up into a leadership role in our department?”

“Interesting,” I said.

“We think you’re ready,” my VP said. “It’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Our department needs you and our organization needs you. So, can you do it? We can sign the paper today and we can make this official on Monday.”

“Wow. This is huge. I’m flattered. It’s definitely worth considering. But I have a question. I’ve never managed anyone before. Do you just expect that Friday I am a regular employee and Monday, magically, I’m a manager?...”

I’m sure your story is unique, meaningful, and memorable to you. This person sounds sort of reluctant, realizing the magnitude of this “first” in his life. But maybe you’re like most people, excited to jump right in and do it, like the engineer.

Having that “supervisor,” “manager,” or “director” title, or something similar, looks good on your business card doesn’t it? You should feel proud – it’s a big deal. And as a new leader, you probably hope to be a great boss, a boss everyone wants to work for.

But what does that even look like?

Well, there’s the “big wigs” and “top dogs” of business, military, politics, religion, or sports you’ve admired. You might aspire to be them one day, so those are good examples. Or, you’ve been lucky enough to have a great boss; that’s a good place to start. Of course, many of us suffered under horrible bosses (not too unlike the movie) so that tells us what we shouldn’t do.
You have your own ideas on how to be a great boss. Don’t you want to know how those ideas hold up to the facts?

**Don’t Believe the Hype**

Let me set the record straight, and make this very, very, clear. The boss everyone wants to work for is not a perfect, energetic, popular, animated, outgoing, gregarious, touchy-feely, audience-rousing, maverick of a rock-star celebrity who is the smartest in the room, everybody’s friend, and is not just liked, but beloved by all. We might aspire to this, but think about it. The best bosses you worked for weren’t all of those things, were they? Of course not. So, don’t put that type of pressure on yourself.

They also aren’t the all-knowing, god-like, self-admiring, self-involved, brown-nosing, micromanaging, big-headed, rude, controlling, scream-at-and-threaten-people-to-get-the-work-done loners and jerks, who talk a good game and say all the right things, with a win-at-all-costs attitude to boot. That’s not the answer either.

The science I’ll present and the stories you’ll read will describe how you can be the type of boss everyone wants to work for. It is possible. But before you start, take advice from the great philosopher (OK, rapper) Eminem: “You only get one shot, do not miss your chance to blow this opportunity comes once in a lifetime, yo.”

No doubt, you’re anxious to get on the fast track and what a great way to start. Maybe you feel joy and acceptance, like you finally made it. Maybe you’re scared. Yeah, you could feel some dread. The thought of you getting stuck with it may cross your mind too. But in the end, you know you deserved it. You think you can master being a leader
just as quickly as you mastered the work that got you promoted into leadership in the first place. The opportunity to change so many things at your organization for the better is there. And like any “first,” you know as well as Eminem does, you will never get a second chance at leading others for the first time in your life. The pressure is on. Bring it.

Regardless of how you felt or under what circumstance you were promoted, I am willing to bet this: No matter what profession, function, or field you are in; working behind a desk, on the sales floor, or out in the field; working for the government, a not-for-profit, a Fortune 500 or otherwise; woman or man; young or old; in the U.S., U.K., Saudi Arabia, Singapore or any place in between – the reason behind your “I just got promoted into management for the first time” story and experience is shared with almost every other new leader out there:

I was an individual contributor or professional who got promoted into my first managerial role because I am highly competent, I have a track record of exceeding expectations, I am damn good at what I do, and, much like Liam Neeson in the “Taken” movie, I have a very particular set of skills, skills I have acquired over a career.

So maybe you have a particular set of skills. But as an industrial-organizational psychologist who studies and conducts research on effective, and failed leaders, and as someone who designs and trains leadership development and executive education programs specifically for new leaders, one thing I’ve come to know is this:

Exceeding expectations and having a very particular set of technical skills helps a person stand out from others, makes a high-performing employee, and possibly a kick-ass movie hero. It does not necessarily make a boss everyone wants to work for.

The Price of Being an Ineffective New Leader
It’s funny that you were probably promoted into your first managerial role and became a boss due to your individual success, technical savvy, subject matter expertise, and smarts. Funny because all that and a Starbucks gift card will only get you a venti iced skinny hazelnut macchiato, extra shot, light ice, no whip, when it comes to leading others. Ironically, as a new leader, you can’t rely on most of the things that got you that promotion into leadership in the first place. New leaders must do something much more substantial, and frankly, much more different than anything they’ve ever done before in their professional careers. It’s probably why so many are struggling, even failing in their new gigs as bosses. Each of us could probably talk about one right now, or worse, feel that way about ourselves. And the numbers would back these stories too. Consider the following findings over the past decade:

- 82% of frontline leaders (where many new leaders are in organizations) are not rated as “excellent” in skills and capabilities as leaders.¹
- 80% of frontline leaders are dissatisfied with the job they are doing as leaders, and 70% of senior managers agree.²
- 40% of newly promoted leaders fail within the first 18 months.³
- 50% of managers are labeled as incompetent, a disappointment, a wrong hire, or a complete failure by their coworkers.⁴

Organizations are promoting those who have never led before into important leadership roles at entry- and first-level positions on the frontlines mostly due to their great technical skill, their subject matter expertise, and excellent performance. And the numbers say what many of us know first-hand: New leaders on the frontlines are struggling, and it’s hurting the people around them, their productivity, and their engagement. Poor frontline leadership is the reason engagement programs are ineffective, and employees feel unhappy, uninspired, and less empowered.⁵ Upwards of 60% or more report a loss of engagement, productivity, and turnover when there is poor
frontline leadership and in fact, one-out-of-four organizations report a loss of profit due to poor, ineffective, frontline leaders.⁶

The raw deal of becoming a new leader. These stats and stories hide an important fact. New leaders get a raw deal. Actually, many of them get no deal at all. If you’re a new leader reading this, odds are you probably know, and feel, what I’m talking about. According to a recent CareerBuilder survey⁷, almost 60% of new leaders receive nothing in formal training or development when they become a boss for the first time. Nothing. Just a “We can make this official on Monday” congratulations and an expectation that as soon as HR approves the promotion, they will lead others just as effectively, if not better, than middle-to-senior-level executives who have had years of leadership experience. Or, as one new leader told me when he became a boss for the first time:

“I got a congratulatory handshake from my manager and this piece of advice as he walked away: ‘Now don’t screw it up.’ That was the training and development I got as a new leader.”

Can you think of any occupation or job, any task or skill, any time when someone takes on something new that they’ve never done before and received no training, no counseling, no orientation or prep work? With the added expectation that they excel right from the start? Would you put someone behind the wheel of a car, big rig, motorcycle, or airplane without months of proper training? There are orientation programs for new employees. There’s marriage counseling for “nearlywed” couples. There’s Lamaze class for expecting parents. In almost everything that you do, where something about to happen is “new” and unique that you’ve never done before, or some part of your life is about to
change, there is almost always something new to learn and some sort of support there to help you understand what’s going to happen to maximize your success.

And it’s not that way for those of us new to leadership?

To quote Vizzini from *The Princess Bride*: “Inconceivable.”

Becoming a leader for the first time in your life is no doubt one of the biggest psychological and emotional shifts you will ever experience in your career. It’s totally different than what you do in your normal, everyday work. It’s inconceivable that you aren’t getting any training, development, or help, given your importance. You are part of the biggest population of leaders in organizations: entry- and first-level managers, supervisors or directors on the frontlines. You are often regarded as the most important leaders to the long-term future of organizations. You directly supervise and lead more people than any other managerial level in organizations. You often have the biggest impact on team productivity, employee engagement, and customer satisfaction.

Yet so often, nothing is done to help individual contributors transition into leadership when they’ve never led anyone before. And for those fortunate few who actually do get help, they get way less in time and support than a mid-to-senior-level executive who usually gets two-to-five-times more development dollars than a new leader on the frontlines.10

Inconceivable. And sadly, true.

You and other new leaders are getting a raw deal, as if you were being set up for failure before you even get started. That’s why my passion is helping new leaders like you successfully transition into the boss everyone wants to work for.
Why This Book

I want to help new leaders by turning the research I conduct and know into practical, actionable content you can use now in your leadership role. Whether you are on the fast-track and about to be a boss for the first time, you literally just got promoted into leadership for the first time, or you’ve only been a boss for a few months, this book is for you. It is designed for the almost 60% of new leaders who get nothing when they become a boss for the first time, and help the others who received some training and development, but by no means the time, help, resources, and attention deserved.

But let’s say you’ve had that “supervisor,” “manager,” or “director” title on your business card or LinkedIn profile for a while now. You’ve been a boss, but it’s gotten old. Maybe you’re one of those statistics; you never received the training and development to enhance your knowledge, skills and abilities when you got promoted long ago. Even though I just said you never get a second chance to lead others for the first time, well, this is your golden ticket. This book can help you by getting what you may have never received.

If you want to be more than that title on your business card and you want to step up your game, there’s hope. This is your fresh start. You can be a new leader and the boss everyone wants to work for.

Why this book over any other book on leadership? As you read this, there’s probably some eye-rolling. Hey, I get the potential hypocrisy in all of this. Writing about “how to be the boss everyone wants to work for” is so much different (and easier) than actually being that boss. It would be like someone writing a book on parenting who has
never been a parent before, and expecting people to buy it, read it, recommend it, and become a best-seller. Anybody can write a book on leadership these days. Just include what people like to hear, sprinkle in some feel-good inspirational stories, anecdotes, testimonials, and advice, right? You don’t even have to be a leader to write one.

While that could work, would you be willing to risk your success as a new leader on unproven opinion and advice that rarely has credible evidence to back it up? By those who may have never lived a day being a boss, or can’t even remember what it was like being a new leader?

I get how you feel, because I would feel the same. I’d be curious, hesitant, skeptical, maybe even a little cynical and critical. I get it, because I am it: As I wrote this book, I got promoted into my first managerial role ever, a director. One day I was a researcher, and I still consider myself a damn good one. But now I’m a new leader. In fact, that reluctant leader you read about earlier? That’s me. Here’s the rest of that story:

“Wow. This is huge. I’m flattered. It’s definitely worth considering. But I have a question. I’ve never managed anyone before. Do you just expect that Friday I am a regular employee and Monday, magically, I’m a manager?... Plus, I’m writing a book for new leaders. If I take this director position, I won’t have time to write the book which means a lot to me. Being a boss takes up so much time. I train them and I’ve heard their horror stories. I know I’ve said it before, but I still feel the same: Now’s just not the right time.”

“Well, don’t you think it’s the perfect time since you’ve done the research on what it takes to be a new leader?” My VP continued, “You can use your research to help yourself as a new leader. And your experience, along with the research and training you do, can help so many new leaders out there who’ll read the book. That’s a win-win for everyone.”

I’m not saying I was “guilted” into taking the position. But, my VP used my own research and passion to help new leaders and those who deserved to get help but never did when they stepped up into leadership, to persuade me to take the position. And it
worked. That’s why I think this book, more than any other out there right now, is so uniquely positioned to help you and other new leaders. I use research, best practices, my experience training new leaders, and stories from the frontlines (including my own), to persuade, educate, move, challenge, and inspire you as a new leader your first time out, or this time around, to be the boss everyone wants to work for. I want this book to help you transition from acting as a successful individual contributor and technical expert to thinking and behaving like a leader.

So how is this book any different than the thousands of other books on leadership? Because it delivers the triple-threat: science, practice, and art. I research new leaders. I train them. I am them.

The science: I research them. I’m a quant geeky researcher, I admit it. I’m an industrial-organizational psychologist, and proud of it. I love research and have a passion around using it to help convince leaders what to do (and not do). Particularly new leaders. The scientific research I provide in this book is either tested over time or is the newest and best out there. In fact, my latest research examines almost 300 new leaders for the sole purpose of this book. What you’ll read is customized to help new leaders and those on the frontlines. So, if you need reasons why you should do things to be the boss everyone wants to work for, it’s not based on my opinion. It’s the science and research that will tell you why.

But I promise, you won’t find a bunch of statistics, equations, and correlations here (I know that’s a relief; no offense taken). What you will find are insights separating fact from fiction from my knowing and doing the research and all the reading and writing
of academic articles, blogs, and tweets that come with it. You will clearly understand what the research means for new leaders and what to grab from it.

**The practice: I train them.** I’ve had opportunities to train other, more seasoned leaders. But I have a place in my heart for new leaders and managers working on the frontlines. They are so important to the success of organizations, and impact the lives of so many people. And as I said, it’s inconceivable that they don’t get the help and support they deserve.

From my experience designing and training programs specifically for new and frontline leaders, I will feature these best practices, based on good science. You’ll have the best knowledge at your fingertips and the answers to many questions new leaders often have. Some will be quick and easy fixes. Others are more difficult and will take time. All will be applicable to you, and can be used in the moment, or as part of long-term developmental plans to help you succeed.

**The art: I am them.** Science explains why. Practice says what. But, one of the best ways I’ve found to understand and help you and other new leaders be effective is the how. *How* do you do this “leadership” thing anyway? *How* do you apply the science and the practice? The only way is to speak from the successes, mistakes, and experience of actually being one. That’s the how. That’s the art. And it will all be detailed in this book.

Unlike most new leaders, I knew exactly what I was getting into based on my research and from the hundreds of new leaders I’ve trained. That’s why I was so hesitant. I knew it would be difficult before I even started. Being a boss for the first time in your life is not as glamorous as everyone thinks. At times, it’s thankless.
I totally sympathize and empathize with every single new leader out there. I’ve felt and experienced what you’ll likely go through or what you’ve already faced. You can’t rely on the technical skills that got you promoted. Dealing with people more than you had to (or wanted to) before may be demanding. Letting go of the work that you loved doing can leave you confused, frustrated, or threatened. It’s awkward and uncomfortable at times. You get angry. You sometimes feel alone and lost. Doubt starts to creep in. You start second-guessing yourself. There are times you don’t feel very bright, maybe even on the verge of total failure. You feel no one really “gets” you and your situation.

But I do. I’ve felt all those things.

But there’s the flip side as well. As a new leader, you can make a difference in the lives of others and your organization. You help people set, meet, and even exceed their goals and expectations. You can inspire others to greatness. That sense of a “win” when your team helps others, develops the next big innovative product, or lands that whale of a client is exhilarating. I know how valuable you can be to the people you lead and serve.

As a boss promoted into his first leadership position ever, I’m right there with you, and that’s one of the main reasons why I wanted to write this book. I wanted to help all new leaders out there get it right this time with stories backed by sound, reliable evidence and advice that is tried and tested. But whatever you do or however you feel – frustrated, worried, apprehensive, scared, overwhelmed, or worse, think that “I can’t do this,” – I truly believe you can be the boss everyone wants to work for. There is a way. Just follow this one main idea in everything you do as a leader: Flip your script.