



Attached is an excellent book summary, provided to us by the offices of Douglas Clark, executive coach and long-time friend.

Enjoy!

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# The Secrets of the Superbosses

From: "The Secrets of the Superbosses" Written By: Sydney Finkelstein  
in Harvard Business Review, Jan-Feb 2016 HBR Reprint R1601J  
Prepared By James McSherry: For Doug Clark's Office

*In this article the author draws on over a decade of work to understand what distinguishes an elite group of business leaders from their peers. The article is drawn from his recent book Superbosses. He identifies one key trait that distinguishes his "superbosses" from the others: their ability to groom talent.*

The author's interest in this subject began when he recognized that when you look at the top people in a given industry he often found that as many as half of them once worked for the same well-known boss. These bosses didn't just build organizations; they spotted, trained, and developed a future generation of leaders. The author identified some key personality traits that contributed to their success but also uncovered some practices that others could emulate.

Superbosses come in three forms:

- Glorious Bastards – the only thing that matters to these bosses is winning – think Larry Ellison
- Nurturers – these coaches and teachers resemble traditional mentors – think Coach Bill Walsh
- Iconoclasts - their single minded passion inspires others in creative fields – think Ralph Lauren

The superbosses share a number of personality traits which contribute to their success: extreme confidence, competitiveness and imagination. They use these traits to inspire others not to overpower them. But more importantly these traits also fuel the business practices they use in two key areas: hiring and honing talent. What do they do here that makes them superbosses?

## Unconventional Hiring

Superbosses begin by seeking out unusually gifted people – individuals who are capable not merely of driving a business forward but of rewriting the very definition of success. There are four keys to success in this area:

**Focus on intelligence, creativity and flexibility:** Superbosses value these three attributes above all others. They truly want to have people smarter than they are working for them. They know they can work with this intelligence without being subordinated by it. Superbosses want people who can approach problems from new angles, handle surprises, learn quickly and excel at any position. They look for people with versatility not position players.

**Find unlikely winners:** Superbosses consider credentials, of course, but they're also willing to take chances on people who lack industry experience or even college degrees. Because they reject preconceived notions of what talent should look like, superbosses often show greater openness toward women and minorities. Bill Walsh started a fellowship program in the NFL for minority coaches to broaden the field of coaching talent. Superbosses often dispense with the conventional interview process. They pose unusual or quirky questions and use observation as a tool. Ralph Lauren would ask candidates how they chose what to wear that day. Another CEO would invite candidates to climb a 7,000 foot peak near their head office.

**Adapt the job or organization to fit the talent:** Superbosses opportunistically tailor jobs and sometimes even their organizations to new hires. Lorne Michael's mixes up the roles on his creative

teams. Writers become actors. Actors are assistant directors. George Lucas dispensed with job descriptions. He deployed talent to various projects based on what was needed and who was available.

**Accept churn:** Smart, creative, flexible people tend to have fast-paced careers. Some may want to move on soon. That's OK with superbosses. They understand that quality of talent is more important than stability in their team. Turnover is an opportunity to find fresh stars. This kind of attitude has an added payoff: When word gets out that people who work for you succeed not only at your organization but outside it, the world will start beating a path to your door. Superbosses barely need to recruit because their reputations bring a continuous stream of talent to them.

### **Hands-on Leadership**

Superbosses have a distinct way of developing employees. They have the ability to make exceptional people do the impossible. What principles drive this ability?

**Set high expectations:** Superbosses are bullish on what their teams can accomplish. "Perfect is good enough" captures their attitude. But superbosses go beyond pushing hard for results and instill a sense of confidence and exceptionalism in their people. Some employees find it very hard to go back to feeling "ordinary" once they have worked for a superboss.

**Be a master:** Superbosses are extremely effective delegators. Having chosen smart, ambitious, adaptable people and offered them vision, they trust the team to execute. They do this without distancing themselves from the business. They are intimate with the details. Like highly skilled craftsmen, superbosses give protégés an unusual amount of hands-on experience but also monitor their results. They work closely enough to "elicit skills" but not so closely as to "limit skills".

**Encourage step-change growth:** Superbosses offer advancement opportunities far beyond those found in traditional organizations. They customize career paths for protégés who have proven their worth in order to dramatically compress learning and growth.

**Stay connected:** Superbosses counsel their protégés for the long-term. They continue to offer advice even after they have left the organization. They make their network available on an ongoing basis. They recognize that their protégés success could lead to new and exciting business opportunities in the future.

The superbosses highlighted in the article are business founders, owners or CEO's. They are in a position to put their imprint on the policies and practices within their organization and are hiring for senior management. How can others move closer to the ideal of a "superboss"? The author suggests that you experiment with one or two of the practices outlined. Consider unorthodox candidates for positions. Remember that people are more effective when they feel confident and make it your job to build them up. Get in the trenches more often with line employees – you can learn much more about them this way and they can learn directly from you. Look for opportunities to delegate big responsibility even to younger team members.

Superbosses display many of the qualities of servant leaders. They are deeply interested in the success of their people as the foundation for the success of their business. They see themselves as catalysts for other people's success. They focus on the people and not the financial results all the time. They don't worry about hiring the smartest: they have the confidence to be pushed and take the risk of leveraging these smarts. Using the tactics mentioned can assist you in creating an organization that nurtures talent and has a high-performing culture – two keys to building a dynamic and sustainable business.