

The Delicate Art of Being Perfectly Assertive

by [Robert I. Sutton](#)

JUNE 28, 2010

Recently, I posted a list of 12 Things Good Bosses Believe. Now I'm following up by delving into each one of them. This post is about the fourth belief: "One of the most important, and most difficult, parts of my job is to strike the delicate balance between being too assertive and not assertive enough."

The upshot of my earlier post called *Some Bosses Live in a Fool's Paradise* is that the best bosses stay in tune with how their words and deeds are construed by their followers, but there is a lot about being a human being and wielding power over others that makes such perspective-taking difficult.

One area where self-awareness is particularly hard to gain has to do with one's level of assertiveness. Bosses often can't tell when they're pushing people too hard versus not challenging them sufficiently. But as research conducted at Columbia University by Daniel Ames and Frank Flynn suggests (see [this pdf](#)), striking the right balance between being too assertive and not assertive enough is immensely important to being (and being perceived as) a great boss.

Ames and Flynn began with the observation that managers who are too assertive are seen as overbearing and that damages their relationships with others; but managers who are not assertive enough don't end up achieving much with their teams that they – and their peers and superiors – can take real satisfaction in. With this in mind, they hypothesized that the best bosses would be rated roughly average on terms like “competitive,” “aggressive,” “passive,” and “submissive” by their direct reports. Indeed, this is what they found when they asked 213 MBA students to assess their most recent bosses on various dimensions. There was tremendous overlap between the bosses rated as moderately assertive and the bosses rated most effective overall. The MBAs also deemed those moderately assertive bosses to be most likely to succeed in the future, and to be people they would be happy to work with again.

And what of the bosses judged to be ineffective overall? Ames and Flynn found that lapses in assertiveness (whether by being too assertive or not assertive enough) were mentioned as hallmarks of these weak leaders far more often than deficits in “other commonly studied attributes, including intelligence, conscientiousness, and charisma.”

When I heard about this research, I couldn't help but think of a quote from Tommy Lasorda, who has worked for the Los Angeles Dodgers for almost 50 years, including a 20-year stint as the team's manager. The first day he took charge of the team, Tommy said to the press: “I believe managing is like holding a dove in your hand. If you hold it too tightly you kill it, but if you hold it too loosely, you lose it.”

Call it Lasorda's law: Being just assertive enough, while not easy for any boss, is one of the most important features of a good one. And it isn't simply a matter of arriving at some correct calibration and then sticking with it. Rather, the best bosses get the balance right on any given day, and in myriad interactions with their followers, peers, and own bosses. Commenting on their research, Ames and Flynn say it isn't that highly regarded managers are moderately assertive all the time. Rather they modulate between pushing people hard

enough at certain times, and backing off appropriately at other times. Being flexible and socially sensitive – knowing when it’s the right time for either approach – enables them to be seen as motivating and engaged, but not as bullying or micro-managing.

To this point, when I had finished writing much of my new book, I had a conversation with the very talented Marc Hershon about what to call it. Marc is unusually good at naming things. He’s the branding expert who named the Blackberry and the Swiffer, for example, and has helped authors like Tom Kelley and Dr. Phil come up with titles for books that turned into bestsellers. (Marc also co-authored his own book called *I Hate People* and produces all manner of other creative output, including screenplays, TV scripts, jokes for the likes of Jay Leno and Dana Carvey, and weekly political cartoons for San Francisco-area newspapers.) Based on the chapters he read, and thinking about the bosses he knew, he suggested the title “Top Dog on a Tightrope.” What struck him, in other words, was the constant balancing act required. He also thought it was important to emphasize that, while everyone misjudges a step now and then, the best ones fall less often, because they have the skill to make constant and correct adjustments to stay out of trouble.

How can a new boss – or a veteran lousy boss – develop this skill? I’m sure some of your bosses come across as overbearing jerks, and others as wimps and doormats. What signals could they pick up, and then know to push harder? How are those different from the ones telling them to back off? How much difference would it make to your team to have a top dog who could stay on the tightrope?

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