

# Leadership

## Boring = good? Inspirational = bad?

### A thoroughly counterintuitive approach to the art of leading



For Bob Sutton, leadership is not a set of abstract principles and behaviors but an expression of human comedy and tragedy. The Stanford professor knows the academic research, but many of his insights are drawn from the hundreds of conversations he has had with business leaders, including some of Silicon Valley's brightest stars. Sutton has

also become a kind of Wailing Wall for beleaguered managers (and managed) who share their tales of woe in response to books such as *Good Boss*, *Bad Boss* and *The No Asshole Rule*.

Recently, Sutton spoke with *Inc.* editor-at-large Leigh Buchanan about when good leaders go bad—and vice versa.

**You and I have been e-mailing about leadership traits, and at one point you suggested, "Good leaders know when to be boring, vague, emotionally detached, and authoritarian." Under what circumstances might such traits be desirable? Start with boring.**

There are two situations in which it's a good idea to be boring. One is when you're working on something but, so far, all you've got is bad news. Under those circumstances, any outside attention is bad.

Don Petersen was the CEO of Ford after the Iacocca era, and he was responsible for turning the company around. He told me a story about being invited to speak at the National Press Club. He didn't want to do it. At the time, Ford had no good cars at all. But he and his PR chief decided he would go and give a speech about the most boring subject they could think of. At the time, that was safety. He practiced speaking in the most boring way possible, using the passive voice and long sentences. He put up charts that were hard to read, and then

turned his back to the audience to talk about the charts. After that, the press lost interest in him for a while, so he could concentrate on doing the work.

The other situation is when you're dealing with controversy. Stanford used to have this brilliant provost, James Rosse. When Jim talked about something like the school's Nobel Prize winners, he would be animated and exciting and charismatic. But when he had to talk about something like the lack of diversity on campus, he would ramble on for 20 minutes while looking at his feet. I thought it was brilliant.

**When is it desirable to be vague?**

There's a lot of research on the value of ambiguity. If you're not too specific, it gives you more operating room. But you still have to sound specific. Politicians are very good at that.

**Emotionally detached?**

That would be going through the motions but not feeling it. Leaders



carry such an emotional load that there are times you have to do it to protect yourself. I was originally thinking about this in terms of an employee who has to detach in order to deal with an abusive boss. But I've heard CEOs of start-ups as well as big companies talking about how some board member or supplier or somebody is just treating them like shit. In those situations, you have to have the ability to not let it touch your soul.

**Is there ever a reason to be emotionally detached from employees?**

No. Not even when you're firing someone.

**Authoritarian was the last one.**

The more expertise you have and the more time pressure you are under, the more authoritarianism may be necessary. Research shows that people prefer hierarchy to anarchy. If you have a track record and they have faith in you, they want you to step up. At Pixar, for example, the director is king. Brad Bird, who directed *The Incredibles* and *Ratatouille*, is the nicest guy you've ever met. Brad wants you to argue with him. He wants dissension. But in the end, Brad makes the decision. Sorry. That's the way it is.

COURTESY SUBJECT

**Are there traits that are never acceptable in a leader? Corruption and sadism, presumably. Others?**

Corruption and sadism? I guess so. Although there are some leaders with a lot of sadism. I would add persistent sexual harassment. But then there's that guy who founded American Apparel. Lovely human being, huh? As long as you are winning and making money in America, it's amazing what you will get away with.

**Is there a single, unassailable trait that every leader should possess?**

Everything is potentially assailable to an academic. But I would say the ability to understand how you come across to others. The best leaders tend to be moderately assertive. That doesn't mean they are medium pushy all the time. It means that they are good enough at reading a situation to know when to turn up the volume in terms of getting in people's faces versus get out of the way.

**In tough times, what leadership traits are the first to go out the window?**

The ability to look at things in a cognitively complex way. The more stress you are under, the more you oversimplify things. You tend to grab the first decision. It's really easy to become selfish



and stupid. Look at Tony Hayward's performance after the BP oil spill.

**Are there circumstances in which desirable leadership traits work against you? Like being decisive?**

Being decisive is a problem when you act on virtually no information. You succumb to the temptation to do something, even though you're not sure what the right thing is. I remember interviewing Randy Komisar, the venture capitalist, about his experiences as the CEO of a couple of gaming companies, including Lucasarts. He said it's better to pay five game designers to sit around for a year and think about and discuss, over lattes, the game they are going to design than to ramp up 200 designers and have them create a bad game because you can't stand not shipping something. I liked that.

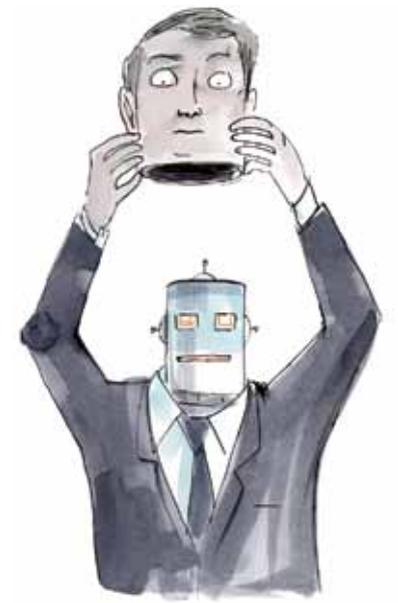
**How about toughness?**

The problem is, you can be in a room with three people and they all have different interpretations of how tough you need to be. Some of that is cultural. The way you would give someone negative feedback at Google would generally be nicer than how you would do it at Intel, just because they have different cultures. Mark Marquess has been the coach of the Stanford baseball team

for more than 30 years. He argues that coaches have to be incredibly schizophrenic. There are prima donnas you have to make feel terrible to get them going. And other players who lack self-esteem that need to be built up. So, half the time he's being an asshole, and half the time he's being a nice guy. That's because he really understands the people he works with.

**Is there ever a downside to being inspirational?**

That can get you in trouble, because happiness is a



function of what you expect versus what you get. It can be better to have people focused on tiny things that keep them enthusiastic about what they're doing minute to minute than to always talk about the grand vision. Most of what gets us to that grand vision is ordinary work. Doing boring things well might be the key to success.

**How about charisma?**

Depends on the definition. If charisma is about you being an exciting, emotionally articulate person who draws all the attention to yourself, then you're not motivating people. That's just a big ego display. There's a study that shows that after people become superstar CEOs—they get a lot of press attention, they write a book—their pay goes up, but the performance of their companies goes down. That's a very Jim Collins-y kind of thing.

**Speaking of Jim Collins, what do you think of his Level 5 Leadership concept, which combines humility and drive?**

I think *Good to Great* does a great disservice in that it perpetuates this tendency we have to give too much credit and too much blame to leaders for why things happen. If the company is a great success, the leader is a hero. If it fails, he's the villain. It puts so much focus on leadership, it's ridiculous. Every person I've ever met who told me they were a Level 5 leader was not. Claiming as much is like a diagnosis of arrogance and narcissism.