The Making of a Manager

Top legislative bosses have mastered these essential traits.

BY BRIAN WEBERG

The bad boss—we’ve all had one. Good ones, too, one hopes. There’s no question that the culture of state legislative agencies (all organizations, for that matter) is defined by the behavior of their managers. Unfortunately, too few legislative managers focus on their management roles and responsibilities, instead sticking to the specialization, knowledge and skills they mastered on their way up the career ladder. And too few legislative staff groups recognize, train and promote staff based on their abilities to be good managers.

NCSL has studied the role of staff in many states and conducted numerous workshops on manager performance. The patterns are clear, and the consequences are real. When staff groups ignore the critical need to promote and reward good managers, they become vulnerable to legislators’ dissatisfaction with their services, higher employee turnover and a decline in overall effectiveness.

“Replacing a boss who is in the lower 10th percentile of boss quality with one who is at the 90th percentile increases a team’s total output by about the same amount as would adding one worker to a nine-member team,” write the authors of the 2014 paper “The Value of Bosses.” And numerous national surveys and studies, from the Gallup Poll to the Society for Human Resource Management, agree: The top reason employees quit their jobs is dissatisfaction with their bosses, not their paychecks.

Here are six vital traits great managers share.

Great Communication Skills

Legislative staff want and need communication with their managers that is clearly articulated, rich in content and relevant to the work. In too many legislative workplaces, managers fall short.

Much of the communication deficit appears to be rooted in the adage that “information is power” and in similarly outdated “need to know” and “in the loop” notions about information ownership, hierarchy and distribution. Communication is an everyday job, with many nuances requiring skill and practice to perfect. Great communicators:

Focus on key messages. Effective managers are selective in what they communicate. They don’t spam employees with repetitive emails, announcements and content that is not central to the work and goals of the group. Instead, they focus on what is meaningful and important for their employees to know to succeed. When managers ensure their employees know all they need to know about their work and workplace, everyone benefits.

Make it personal. No amount of email, memoranda or forms can substitute for face time between managers and their employees. Managers who are accessible and who make time for conversations about goals, performance, problem solving or brainstorming foster trust and engagement with employees and within their organizations.

Listen intently. Employees want to know their manager is not just hearing words, but is really listening to the message. Validation is crucial to keeping employees engaged. “Active listening” helps all parties leave a conversation
believing they’ve been heard. In “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People,” Stephen Covey writes that managers should “seek first to understand, then to be understood.” That begins with listening.

**Professionalism**

“Professional is not a label you give yourself—it’s a description you hope others will apply to you.”

David Maister, author and management expert

If an organization values professionalism, its managers need to reflect that in everything they do. For most organizations, professionalism means observing shared principles of excellence, integrity, decorum and respect for employees. In state legislatures, it also means showing respect for the legislative institution.

Most legislative staff groups have policies and norms that define what “professionalism” means. Professional conduct may connect to ethics, language, interpersonal conduct and appearance. Whatever these norms may be, managers are the standard-bearers for professionalism. As the saying goes, managers must “walk the talk” about values. Professional managers stay above the fray and through their actions demonstrate a fair, open and balanced approach to workplace issues and challenges.

When managers violate key values of professionalism, they diminish their effectiveness, threaten employee engagement and morale, and tarnish the image of their work group.

**Consistency**

“Employees, like customers, respond best when management acts in a predictable, not capricious, manner.”

Victor Lipman, Forbes Magazine

Legislative work sometimes can be chaotic and often is filled with uncertainty. In this environment, a manager’s consistent behavior helps employees navigate each day and every challenge. Employees know that important underlying assumptions about their work are solid and that their manager’s support is steady.

“In the places I go there are things that I see
That I never could spell if I stopped with the Z.”

Theodor Geisel’s book “On Beyond Zebra,” published in 1955, was a call to kids (and adults) to explore ideas and possibilities beyond the boundaries of traditional thought and practice. Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss, was decades ahead of his time and popularized the notion that important discoveries were waiting for those who dared to break the rules.

Today’s research on effective management is moving us “beyond zebra” and into fascinating new fields connected to discoveries in brain science and the keys to human motivation. Two authors stand out in this area and deserve the attention of those who aspire to be great managers.

In his book “Drive,” Dan Pink summarizes studies on human motivation that turn traditional concepts of rewards and performance upside down. His work shows that for today’s knowledge workers (including most legislative employees), the old “carrots and sticks” formula simply doesn’t motivate. Instead, the more intrinsic concepts of autonomy, mastery and purpose appear to be much more potent predictors of employee engagement and performance.

Pink defines these performance drivers like this:

- **Autonomy** — the desire to be self-directed
- **Mastery** — the urge to get better at things
- **Purpose** — the desire to contribute to something important

Managers who build workplace cultures of fairness and opportunity can leap forward from that foundation to address Pink’s formula for enhanced productivity and employee engagement.

David Rock’s research and writing follow similar themes. His SCARF model includes “five domains [that] activate either the ‘primary reward’ or ‘primary threat’ circuitry [and associated networks] of the brain.” Rock argues that awareness of these domains, if applied to the manager-employee relationship (or any relationship), can have a profound impact on behavior and performance. The five domains are:

- **Status** — relative importance to others
- **Certainty** — being able to predict the future
- **Autonomy** — a sense of control over events
- **Relatedness** — a sense of safety with others
- **Fairness** — a perception of fair exchanges between people

Employees who sense that management decisions, behaviors and policies threaten them in any of these five domains are more likely to drop out, underperform or struggle. If they feel supported in these areas, however, they are more likely to achieve new levels of engagement and productivity.

“The SCARF model points to more creative ways of motivating that may not just be cheaper, but also stronger and more sustainable,” Rock writes.

Note the parallels between Rock’s and Pink’s models. Their research suggests that traditional top-down, control-and-command management styles might be demotivating for today’s knowledge workers.
Great managers strive to be consistent in everything they do as communicators, planners and motivators, and as enforcers of office rules and policies. Consistency and fairness are different things, but when managers are consistently fair with employees, they build trust and foster employee engagement—key goals for every manager.

Approachability

“Being unapproachable, prickly or guarded shuts people up and shuts them down, cutting off information flow and collaboration vital for a team to do its best work.”

David Peck, executive coach

Approachable bosses build trust and develop positive relationships so that employees feel comfortable bringing them ideas and solutions, or seeking encouragement when their work is challenging. Accessible managers are routinely present at their employees’ workplace. Tom Peters, author of “In Search of Excellence” (cited by some as the best business book of all time), called it “management by walking around.” Great managers know what’s going on with their employees. They also have a sense of the big picture. In the case of state legislatures, great managers are politically astute and in the know about trends and issues that may affect their office and staff.

Great managers don’t barricade themselves in their offices, emerging only for food or to use the facilities. An approachable manager has an open-door policy and a reputation for being a good listener, having a calm voice and engaging with employees in an authentic and consistent manner. Good managers take a real interest in the lives of their employees, and get to know their staff to understand them on a more personal level.

Composure

“Composure is a behavior that people respond to instantly.”

David Spungin, leadership consultant

Most of us have worked for a boss, or have witnessed one, who lost his or her cool when the going got tough or when caught off guard. If it was an isolated event, we probably let it go. But when managers routinely blow up under stress, employees lose confidence in them. Volatile managers can leave employees feeling insecure about their jobs and disengaged from the mission of the work group or office.

Managers who are consistently calm under pressure send a different signal. They instill confidence, trust and loyalty among their employees. This is where managers become leaders. Through their behaviors (not just their words), they define the office culture and set expectations about how to weather the tough moments and work together to solve problems.

Managers who keep their cool recognize the power of their emotions and have learned to keep them in check. They may count to 10 or take five deep breaths or practice yoga or meditation, but by whatever means, they have learned to stop themselves before they blow up. They recognize that moments of stress are opportunities to reinforce workplace values and demonstrate standards of behavior for the entire team.

Self-Awareness

“Becoming a truly effective manager requires a great deal of self-reflection, observation and growth.”

Jennifer Stine, management consultant and educator

Along with our strengths, we all have biases, preferences, emotional baggage and other traits that color the way we work, make decisions and interact with others. When managers become more aware of how their personality traits, experiences and biases affect their decision-making and their approach to people and work, they take a giant leap toward becoming great leaders.

When employees develop similar awareness, a new dynamic is possible for understanding and solving problems and for appreciating the contributions of everyone on the team.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, Strengthsfinder, professional coaching and similar tools help managers and teams enhance self-awareness and discover new ways to communicate; they can promote understanding and diminish the tendency to make things personal.

Managers who spend time developing self-awareness make an investment that can pay off for everyone. If they embrace the values, practices and behaviors outlined above, they’re bound for greatness in their roles, and their workplaces are destined to be the best they can be.