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Superbosses: How Exceptional Leaders Master The Flow Of Talent

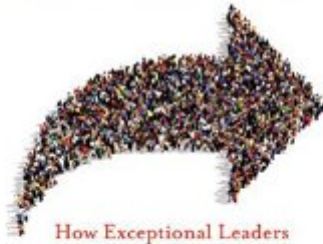
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"Superbosses shows the incredible impact that great managers can have, both on their employees and on entire industries. Finkelstein has written a true leadership guide for the Networked Age."

—Reid Hoffman, cofounder and chairman, LinkedIn; coauthor of *The Alliance*

SUPERBOSSSES



How Exceptional Leaders
Master the Flow of Talent

SYDNEY FINKELSTEIN

author of *WHY SMART EXECUTIVES FAIL*



Synopsis

Based on years of research, Sydney Finkelstein, professor at Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth and author of *Why Smart Executives Fail*, looks at how a select few visionaries develop the most successful talent in every industry. After meeting chef Alice Waters at her legendary restaurant, Chez Panisse, Sydney Finkelstein got to thinking about the dozens of chefs who had come from her establishment to open their own restaurants and gain notoriety as some of the country's most creative culinary figures. Waters, he found, had spawned a family tree of geniuses. Could this pattern exist in other industries? After years of research, Finkelstein found that similarly powerful mentors did indeed exist across every industry from finance to entertainment to fashion and the arts, and they created a network of superstars in their communities using techniques that are varied and often counterintuitive. Finkelstein profiles luminaries such as Waters, Lorne Michaels, Miles Davis, Ralph Lauren, Larry Ellison, and Bonnie Fuller. Drawing on fascinating first-person accounts and surprising best practices, Finkelstein explores a phenomenon that has never been researched before and explains how any leader can create a powerful network and nurture extraordinary talent.

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Customer Reviews

In a previous book, *Why Smart Executives Fail: And What You Can Learn from Their Mistakes* (2003), Sydney Finkelstein shares what his research reveals about how and why presumably capable business leaders fall so far and fall so fast. "My goal was not only to understand why

businesses break down and fail, but to focus on the people behind these failures; not only to understand how to avoid these disasters, but to anticipate the early warning signs of failure. Ultimately, I wanted to move beyond ad hoc explanations of failure on a case-by-case basis and expose the roots of these breakdowns in a definitive way.

He explored how overconfidence, complacency, inaction, and a lack of curiosity prevented otherwise intelligent leaders from adapting to changing business conditions. Whereas in that book, Finkelstein and his research associates were in search of failure's causes, the focus in his latest book is on the causes of what could be described as "super success," revealed during research begun in 2005. He explores the characteristic behaviors of the world's most effective bosses, upending conventional best practices and presenting a new, comprehensive paradigm for developing talent. This book is the first to offer a systematic, empirically based study of what *really* motivates, inspires, and enables others to achieve their full potential. It teaches professionals how to be better bosses so that they can unleash unprecedented creativity, engagement, and accomplishment in their teams, generating and regenerating the world's best talent. And it shows employees in any field how to identify superbosses in their industry so that they can get hired and advance their careers.

Taking into full account more than a decade of research that preceded this book and several decades of close association with hundreds of C-level executives, Finkelstein suggests that there are three basic types of superboss: "Iconoclasts" (e.g. George Lucas, Lorne Michaels, Ralph Lauren, and Robert Noyce), "Glorious Bastards" (e.g. Larry Ellison, Michael Milken, Roger Corman, and Jay Chiat), and "Nurturers" (e.g. Bill Walsh, Norman Brinker, Mary Kay Ash, and Gregg Popovich). What motivates each type? Briefly, Iconoclasts care about their work so wholly fixated on their vision that they are able to teach in an intuitive, organic way, as a natural outgrowth of their passion and in service to it, rather than consciously or methodically. Glorious Bastards have something about them that makes them "glorious": they understand that in order to win, they need the best people and the best teams. They may be egoists, they may want fame and glory for themselves, but they perceive the success of those around them as the pathway to that glory. As for the third type, Nurturers are what I'd call "activist bosses." They are consistently present to guide and teach their protégés and they actively engage with employees to help them reach great heights.

What do all three types share in common? Finkelstein suggests five attributes: All possess *extreme confidence, even fearlessness*, when it comes to furthering their agendas and ideas; all are highly competitive; they are by nature inquisitive and imaginative; all superbosses manifest

impeccable integrity insofar as their *“rather strict adherence to a core vision or sense of self”* are concerned; and finally, all are authentic: in their daily interaction with others, *“they let their personalities hang out.”* My brief comments thus far merely suggest a few of Finkelstein’s key points. When explaining how exceptional leaders master the flow of talent, he develops those and other key points in much greater depth. His approach is to compare and contrast those he characterizes as a superboss with what are generally viewed as the defining characteristics of a *“good but not great”* boss. He examines their impact on colleagues (especially protégés), on their company, and *“in several instances”* on their industry. These are among the several dozen passages of greatest interest and value to me, also listed to suggest the scope of Finkelstein’s coverage in Chapters One-Eight: *o The Makings of a Superboss (Pages 15-21) o Iconoclasts, Glorious Bastards, and Nurturers (25-29) o Memorable Bosses: Five Common Attributes (29-33) o That Special Something (41-44) o The Power of Feeling Unthreatened (48-50) o Perfect Is Good Enough (65-69) o The Ladder of Confidence (69-71) o It’s Hard to Go Back to Being Ordinary, and, Inspiring People Like a Superboss (75-79) o Protect the “Why” (and Only the “Why”) (84-88) o Nothing’s Sacred (88-92) o The Show Must Change (94-98) o Fostering Creativity Like a Superboss (98-101) o Managing in the Moment (108-112) o Teaching Like a Superboss (123-126) o Traders in Opportunity (131-135) o Hire [the Right] People and Get Out of the Way (135-139) o The Big Personality Paradox (139-142) o Crafting the Cult (152-158) o The Cohort Effect (162-166) o Team Building Like a Superboss (166-170)* Finkelstein observes, *“Ultimately, a superboss doesn’t construct his organization around a specific framework or formula. Instead, superbosses embrace a mind-set of change, within a framework of their unyielding vision. That mind-set leads in turn to the welcoming of creative people into the company, to shared experiences that reinforce openness, to an ingrained culture of openness, and ultimately to a track record of sustained invocation and growth.”* These are among Sydney Finkelstein’s concluding remarks: *“In the end, studying these superbosses gives us a master class in how each of us can make an impact [indeed, make a much greater impact] in what we do. Superbosses show us a markedly different and innovative path, one that unites the success of an organization with the people charged with accomplishing that success. Few executives are both willing and able to become a superboss but all of them can accelerate their personal growth and professional development by reading this book, by completing this “master class,” and then applying effectively what they have learned.*

“Superbosses” is an immensely interesting read, in part because of the range of profiles Syd Finkelstein puts in front of us. Syd’s research has always explored leadership in ways that are both public and intimate, but what makes this book valuable is that, beyond the practical takeaways one would expect of a top-tier management professor, it’s an engaging summary of an in-depth study of inspired and inspiring leaders. Frankly, it’s also just fun to read as a set of stories and insights. As Syd points out, this idea of formally exploring the behaviors and mindsets that define what he calls a superboss is relatively undefined in the market. And viable approaches to realizing disproportionate returns on your activities as a leader—how to influence and impact the world beyond the scope of one’s direct interactions and operations—is increasingly a topic of discussion among executives. What’s unfortunate is that we often concentrate our search for learnings on the operational techniques and track record of leaders, but neglect the ways in which they foster intimate and inspiring relationships with the people around them—at scale. Over the course of the book, Syd gives us a language and framework for thinking about the challenges and art of outsized influence. This is a great read if you’re wondering how to get the most out of your boss or for looking at someone you’re considering learning from, since it offers some insight into the signals that the people you’re around might have potential to be truly great and what they’re looking for in their mentees. It’s also a great book if you have aspirations to superbossness yourself. For many leaders and managers, that can be a lonely position, since candid peer conversations are rare. Syd’s research offers a window into how unambiguously compelling leaders and their disciples articulate the assumptions, describe the consistent behaviors, and craft the visions that drive their successes—all valuable as inputs as you construct your own working model of leadership. My take? Well worth reading. Well worth writing down the questions and challenges that surface for you over the course of the book. Well worth seeing how far you can stretch yourself to surround yourself with superbosses and expand your own footprint in the world around you.

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