Super bosses - We All Have a Chance to Be One

A podcast interview with Professor Sydney Finkelstein, Director of the Tuck Center for Leadership (at Dartmouth College), Thinkers50 laureate and author of several management bestsellers

By Roddy Millar
Hello, I'm Roddy Millar. I'm here today with one of the world's leading thinkers on leadership and organizational behavior, Professor Sydney Finkelstein. Syd is the Steve Roth Professor of Management for the Tuck School of Business, with Dartmouth College, one of the original Ivy League universities. He is Director of the Tuck Leadership Center there. He has also been cited twice in 2013 and 2015 on the Thinkers 50 of the World's Top Management Thinkers list.

He's authored over 20 books and 80 articles, including the number one best seller, 'Why Smart Executives Fail'. This year he publishes 'Superbosses: How Exceptional Leaders Master the Flow of Talent' which LinkedIn Chairman Reid Hoffman calls "a leadership guide for the network age", and Jeff Immelt, Chairman and CEO of GE, says "Superbosses' gives leaders a playbook to bring out the best in their people."

I'm thrilled to have him here today to discuss that book and his insights into leadership in creating good organizational culture. Syd, it's great to be with you.

Thank you Roddy. Pleasure.

Your new book has just been published - Superbosses' - and it focuses on your extensive research of some remarkable leaders, and in particular how they develop talent. I was interested: did the research suggest this was the thing these bosses were uniquely good at, or is it one of many great abilities they have?

That's an interesting question, where they absolutely are fantastic at identifying motivating, inspiring, and coaching talent. It turns out that they're also incredibly innovative in their own business careers, and by the way in how they think about talent. One of the takeaways that I've got which is not really how I started is how closely connected this super boss style of developing talent turns out to be with innovation, just how they run their businesses. Yeah, I would say those are the two things that went hand in hand. It's around creating the right culture in the organization, or is it the ability to identify individuals?

Yes, there's a lot there. Certainly they are good at finding talent. They know what to look for, which by the way, is kind of remarkable. There were three main attributes or characteristics they kept going after, time and time again, despite the industry, or regardless of the industry. So, of course, you need certain set of skills in every industry to do whatever the job is. But in addition to those, they were always interested in intelligence, and not just IQ; it could be social relationship-type think, it could be emotional intelligence. Intelligence was always very high on their list, so is creativity, which is not surprising, given the kind of connection to innovation. Then third was extreme flexibility, and that really means they like people that could do a lot of different things and that when they threw them into new challenges they would be able to deal with that and thrive in that situation. They had a particular profile they were looking at, and then once they had them they did all sorts of things to help them get better.

What's interesting, I think, is that you were observing these in a huge variety of different industry sectors, is that not right? The examples that you have like Ralph Lauren, obviously from the fashion side, and you had other creative people like Alice Waters, the chef, but there also Larry Ellison and Michael Milken and people like that who come from a much more technological space. Yet that focus on creativity and innovation and the opportunity for people to have flexibility ran across all the sectors.

Indeed it did. It is remarkable because it's such a diverse group. There were 18 main Superbosses and then a bunch of other people that I came across that I talked about. They cover all sorts of industries, as you mentioned, some tech industries and fashion, restaurant business, but also comedy, science fiction, and special effects with George Lucas, hedge funds with Julian Robertson, and consumer packaged goods

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with Michael Miles. They all had a very similar approach to how they went about thinking about and developing talent. That was another one of these big surprises. Despite how different they really are, when it comes down to it, there were a set of ideas or principles that they engaged in that really help to account for the success of not only themselves, but many of the people that work for them.

I think one of the things that came out of the piece that I read about - the key part about nurturing talent - was the fact that they allowed the talent, that they nurtured to go off and start on their own, or elsewhere, often in normal circumstances other people would look at that and see them allowing competition to grow up, whereas in typical capitalist style, we see as trying to close down competition, or keep hold of the talent. What does that suggest about these guys? Is it that they've either got such enormous egos that they don't feel threatened by them, or that relaxed and calm and after think that the pie is big enough to be shared by them and others?

It's one of the biggest surprises, maybe the most counterintuitive thing that I've found what you're bringing up, which is this idea that talent retention and a focus on talent retention might actually not be the best thing to do. What's behind it? It's actually quite strategic or instrumental of them as opposed to maybe philosophical.

Specifically, you used the word 'allow' that usually you don't have people to 'allow' their subordinates to move on. Well, as you well know, you actually don't get a vote in this matter. People can do whatever they want. It turns out that the best people happen to think in a very similar way, which is that they constantly want something new: a new challenge, a new opportunity, a bigger responsibility. Many people want to your job, and then they want your boss's job. At some point in an organization, if you can't keep moving people up to bigger responsibilities, they are going to go elsewhere. Number one, it's going to happen whether we like it or not. Number two, it's going to happen more and more. But presumably these people have been practicing it for a good number of years, if not decades by this stage.

They have in fact. That's why I write in the book: these people have been hiding in plain sight an entirely new way to think about talent, leadership, and innovation, actually is there for the taking. But no one's ever looked that way, and maybe part of it is that as you said yourself some of the Superbosses that I looked at there are no unusual industries for your typical FTSE 250, Fortune 500 type of world. People in fashion, comedy, music, movies, and food, but I also have a lot of conventional people from Fortune 500 from the major industries as well, and they're there.

What they do it's there to be learned from, and I think we're at a stage now where these ideas are already entering the mainstream of how people are thinking about business. I won't say it's quite there in the biggest companies yet. They still have a hard time getting off this idea that all we should care about is keeping our talent. That's an idea that I think is going to hurt you more than it's going to help you in the long term because if all you want to do is optimize and to hurt you more than it's going to help you in the long term is you're not denying reality, which is the best people are going to want to go elsewhere. Why not look for opportunities to make it into a win win?

HCA, gigantic company that dominated the hospital industry in the States for a very long time; still around today, still a major player. He had tremendous talent. He did what many Superbosses do in terms of finding them and developing them. When he felt like they were ready to move on to the next stage of their career, he looked for an opportunity to create a spin-out business for them, and so there could be a mental health clinic or a surgical care unit or whatever it happens to be in that industry.

He would create the business in partnership with them. They would move to become CEO, run their own show. But he and HCA would have some equity ownership over that business. In that way, you’re capitalizing on the upside and at the same time, you’re not denying reality, which is the best people are going to want to go elsewhere. Why not look for opportunities to make it into a win win?

It’s very much building on that millennial, collaborative environment that we’re increasingly seeing, I think, these days. It’s a new style of leadership that’s appearing or being championed more and more. But presumably these people have been practicing it for a good number of years, if not decades by this stage.

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Silicon Valley, by the way, is really a place where you see a bit more of these ideas being embraced. Companies like LinkedIn, Netflix, Google, Amazon, even Apple. There’s a deeper understanding that people can contribute, can work like crazy, can accomplish a lot and then will be ready to move on to do something else, whether it’s their own entrepreneurial start-up thing, or it’s working for somebody else in another company, or whatever it might be. I think it’s not that shocking an idea in Silicon Valley. There’s still work to be done, I think, in mainstream businesses.

It’s presumably got something to do with energy as well, isn’t it? Because start-up Silicon Valley type companies, and some of these highly creative businesses - the fashion houses, the film studios - there’s creative energy in there too, and it’s very project-oriented that gives everyone an impetus to move forward. You highlight the fact that the more
“People remember a great boss that accelerated their career.”

traditional or big corporate Fortune 1000 companies possibly don’t have that energy, now whether that’s cart or horse I don’t quite know which comes first. But is it as easy to be a super boss in an organization, which has a very matrix corporate structure and the hierarchy is very well understood?

I am of the firm belief that there are actually Superbosses in every company today, and in bigger companies there will be more just because of the Law of Large Numbers. I say that because as I’ve been starting to talk about the Superbosses and the ideas of different groups, it’s inevitable that people come up to me afterwards and say “I want to tell you about my super boss.” People remember a great boss, if they had one that accelerated their career, that created opportunities for them, and you never forget people like that either.

These are people I wouldn’t necessarily know about. They’re somewhere in the middle of a company, a large company, and I wouldn’t have been researching them, and either I did the other folks, but they’re absolutely there. I probably have another dozen potential super boss candidates if I wanted to write a sequel about this just from some of these early conversations. I’m actually thinking this would be interesting for readers to consider doing as well, have people write in just a short thing about to tell me about their own super boss because so many people have them.

I interviewed hundreds of people for this research, many of them proteges of Superbosses. They were so delighted, so excited to tell me stories about the person that had such a gigantic impact on their careers. It’s a way of honoring them as well. To answer your question, yes, they’re everywhere. We need to look for them, we need to honor them, and we need to figure out what they’re doing in the way that I did in the book, and then teach others within the company to do the same types of things.

Do you think these Superbosses who aren’t necessarily at the top of their organizations are aware that they are doing something special, or is it just something innate that’s just how they operate?

Yeah, it’s a good question. It’s hard to know. I think many of them are aware in the sense that they are almost certainly doing things differently than, say, the bad bosses out there that most people have had, and probably they themselves have had some pretty lousy bosses over time, it wouldn’t be a shock. They know they’re doing something different. I don’t know whether until now anyone’s put a label on it, now we call them Superbosses, now they know: “that’s right. That’s what I’ve been trying to do all this time, and maybe now I’ll get some help.” But I do think that what they do can be learned.

I think people could figure it out. I spent a lot of my time in my own research trying to answer that question, “how would you teach somebody this, can you really learn this because?” some people will think it’s just intuitive. While it may be intuitive for Ralph Lauren, I don’t imagine him sitting around with the consultancies around him figuring out how to be a better boss. He just did what he did. Once you know what that is, you could lay it out as a super boss playbook, which we got in the book and then go and pick and choose those ideas that make the most sense in your own culture.

It’s interesting you mentioned culture there because clearly one studies what the closest and most available is to you, but I think all the ones that I see here, correct me if I’m wrong, certainly the vast majority are US or North American. It’d be really interesting to get an insight into whether this approach of Superbosses is replicated or is seen as different in different cultures? Have you had any sort of opportunity to explore that a bit?

Yeah, I’m actually in the early stage of doing exactly that. I’ve reached out to some thought leaders in different countries and described what it is I’m interested in, and I’m going to ask him, “do you know anyone that’s a business leader that has done this and this and this?” This is the super boss playbook, and just very early days of starting to get back some of those responses.

My premise is that there will be Superbosses everywhere, in every type of company, in every type of country. The reason I say that is because at its core what Superbosses do is a very human thing. They establish a legacy. They help other people. This is my definition of a super boss, by the way. A super boss is a boss or a leader who helps other people accomplish more than they ever thought possible. I can’t tell you how many times proteges I interviewed use almost exactly those words to describe their super boss. What they do is they leave a legacy. I think it’s a very human, it’s a very human thing to understand the concept of legacy to leave something after you, and in this case via helping other people get better. I think that does cross cultures. I think that does cross all kinds of situations. As a result, I think we’re going to find a lot.

There have been Superbosses in history as well. I didn’t go and study that in any great detail, but one of the characteristics of Superbosses is how they create an apprenticeship approach to managing their people. As you know, apprenticeships is how the world of organization worked for centuries, and it’s only in the more modern times that it’s become quite rare, with a couple of exceptions. Well, Superbosses, that’s what they’re doing. They’re resurrecting that apprenticeship model. That actually, if you think about it, goes back into time and into history. I think it’s a very generalized, very broad concept and philosophy and set of specific ideas on how to become a better boss.

I’m fascinated by that because I’m increasingly seeing and growing an awareness of the fact that as we progress into the 21st century and technology gets more and more ingrained into our everyday lives, we wear it now as well as using it. In fact we’re heading back, and this goes back to the point we made earlier around collaborative leadership and communities that in fact it’s much more now about relationships, and we’ve been through a 150/200-year period of industrial revolution where everything became terribly automated and unitized, but now we’re moving to perhaps a more relationship-focused ability to work with other people in organizations. That allows a more, for want of another word, paternal approach in developing leaders. It seems to me that that’s what we have here. That stewardship approach of taking a much longer term and not developing people perhaps
or I am barking up the wrong tree?

Well, I’d be honest with you Roddy. I had not thought a great deal about that broader philosophical, and maybe I agree it’s a big change taking place in the global economy, especially in advanced economies. But as you describe it, I think it does fit the bill to a T. Superbosses are very much in a sense of collaborating and working in teams. Here’s an ironic part about this. They are very, very strong individual contributors as well. It’s not that they’re just all about relationships or collaboration. They know how to be very competitive. They know how to win.

In fact one of the personality traits of Superbosses is how competitive they actually are. It’s not that they don’t have that part of their repertoire, but they add this other dimension. It stems from, I think, a core understanding that in fact that the best way to win, as an organization and for you as an individual leader, is to be able to generate and regenerate talent on a continuous basis. In fact that is almost the only way to survive and thrive in the long term for any organization.

It becomes a central element. It’s actually insight that first got me started on the whole Superbosses research. That takes you down a path that says “if I want to be successful I need great people around me”, and it’s not a one-time thing, and I’d figure my team is set. I don’t have to do anything else; I am done. It’s much bigger than that. It’s continuous. That’s why the subtitle of the book is ‘How Exceptional Leaders Master the Flow of Talent’. I think that’s a really critical turn, the flow of talent that I don’t think a lot of people are talking about that yet, but I think it’s going to become something people will pay a lot more attention to.

The flow of talent is about not only bringing people in, and not only developing them and working with them, and helping them get better, but how you manage them by moving them around, sometimes as we discussed moving them out. All of those things, I think, are part of what Superbosses are all about. I think it does connect nicely to this idea of legacy, collaboration, and of the power and importance of relationships.

In your HPR article, there are three types of Superbosses, and the first one that’s put down there is glorious bastards, which does suggest that they’re not necessarily all really nice easy going guys. There is obviously that tension between that driven personality that you describe, but also this ability to nurture as well. Nurture is the second of the three types you have there. Are they doing slightly different things?

Yeah, it’s a great point. First of all, they actually do the same thing. There are some variations and some exceptions; glorious bastards, the tough bosses, tough Superbosses. They tend to be a little bit less comfortable with the idea of their best people leaving. It still happens, but they don’t go quite as aggressively in that direction compared to nurturers. But the broader thing is it really points out something that maybe people don’t understand about mentoring.

Mentoring is a big word; it’s been around forever. The problem with the word mentoring is it’s been around forever, and so doesn’t mean anything to anyone other than, well we treat people well, or you give a because individually you really like them or you want them to do better because you think by doing, by developing them you help the greater whole prosper. Is that the sense that little bit of advice. There are different ways to develop talent, and we should get rid of that word mentoring because it puts us into a little pigeon hole. That’s why I use these describe these three types the glorious bastards, which are the really tough ones, the nurturers, which are very supportive, and iconoclasts that are a little bit more creative, and organic in how they think about developing talent.

Yes, you can be a really, really difficult boss. You can be tough. You can be demanding, and you still could help other people get better in whatever it is they’re doing. I’m not saying it’s for everyone. The truth is, and this is true for each of the types of Superbosses, you have to really be willing to be in that game. You have to be willing to work hard, you have to be willing and have that aspiration yourself to get better and to look for bigger opportunities because that’s the game that the Superbosses are playing.

There are all in. They are compelling characters, and they’re going to give you a lot to do. They’re going to give you huge challenges. They are going to open doors for you. If you are unable to do that, or you choose not to want to do that, well they’ll let you leave sooner rather than later, and maybe you’ll leave yourself because it’s not the right fit for you. I’m not going to say it’s for everyone. I think it’s probably for almost everyone who’s reading this and for many people and organizations who want to fulfill their potential as a leader, as a manager, or whatever job that they’re doing. And go back to millennials, they want an engaging work life. They want to have an impact. That’s what Superbosses do, but you’ve got to be willing to meet them more than halfway. They’re not all the same and they could be tough.

In terms of developing these Superbosses, or trying to become one, what are the key elements that perhaps we ought to be focusing on and looking at?

Well, so again anyone could become a super boss, so it’s not that you can’t. Also say, by way of preface that we have to be careful of not kind of saying “oh my god there’s 20 things you’ve got to do, and I can’t do that. It will take me a year or two or three.” These Superbosses didn’t become Superbosses overnight either. What’s wrong with trying one or two different approaches or techniques that you feel comfortable with? Move on from that and expand or extend your repertoire, your super boss repertoire, over time.

How do you become a super boss? It’s a mindset shift, more than anything else. It’s a shift that says again that my job is to generate and regenerate talent. My job is to hit my numbers, accomplish my goals, make a lot of money, if that’s what your job is about, or provide great customer service, if that’s what your job is about, or whatever happens to be, that’s there, and then the people side is there. They’re both there together at the same time. They turn out to be self-reinforcing. It’s a mindset shift in the sense that you have to be willing to think that way, or be open minded to thinking that way, and then second there are a lot of specific things you can do.

We’ve talked about actually some of them from what should you look for in your new hires, how do you go

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about the hiring process, don’t let yourself become beholden to the job description, which is kind of classic HR practice. You get a job description, you go and look at a bunch of resumes, and then maybe some interviews, and you pick the the man or the woman who checks the most boxes. Well, yeah, we’re going to do that, certainly. But don’t only do that. Be open to finding great talent wherever you can find, wherever you come across them and create a job, great jobs for people that look great to you, even if you don’t have that job because that again is a shift in how you think as a boss or as a leader.

Super bosses spend a lot of time inspiring people, and not inspiring in rah-rah type of thing. They truly believe their message. If you’re going to work, he’s like if you’re working for me and I’m a super boss, I have these aspirations, I have this vision, I have a bunch of things I want to accomplish that I truly believe in, and I want people that are going to be able to buy into that core vision, but I want you then to think about breaking all the rules along the way. If you are, say, Ralph Lauren, and you’ve created this vision of a luxury lifestyle where all the components of your life from clothes and furnishings and houses, and all the rest, come together to give you a certain image or feeling, that’s his world view. That’s his vision of what fashion should be.

You’re not going to change that if you work for him, and if you tried you wouldn’t last. If you can come up with ways he hasn’t thought of to accomplish that fundamental vision, he’ll be delighted. Larry Ellison, a tough guy, CEO and Founder of Oracle, loved people that could push back and challenge. He loved a good fight, a good argument. He wanted people that changed his way of thinking. I can go on with a dozen other things. There are a lot of things that Super bosses or prospective Super bosses could do and should do if they want to up their game, and actually get a little bit closer to what these folks have been doing.

But it’s interesting, isn’t it? This is everybody talking about bosses, so it’s entirely reasonable, but the boss setting, the culture beneath them to enable that freedom of expression, that flexibility, that challenging to happen in a safe environment. If you’re a middle manager or at least someone not at the top of the organization, and you’re trying to put this kind of system in place, then inevitably that’s going to flow up above you as well as what’s happening beneath you, and you could very quickly be stymied by meeting someone at a higher level who doesn’t take the super boss approach, and is much more boxing in than that. I wonder if you came across the sort of people who were restricted in their ability to create that super boss environment, if they weren’t at the top of the tree.

Yeah, a good question. I think there’s a couple of things here. First as I said earlier, I really do think there are Super bosses at middle management, lower middle management, upper management, not just at the very top. Within that team or that unit or that officer, that region or that product group or that brand, whatever your job happens to be, as the boss you have a tremendous amount of authority and opportunity to create a super boss-like environment. You can do a lot of the things that Super bosses do. Maybe you can’t do every single one of them, but you can do a lot of them. The facts that say the CEO is very different character, and is not going to be part of this world, doesn’t think about it this way that is going to be more of an excuse than anything else in my opinion.

It’s there, but that doesn’t mean you don’t have the ability to change what’s going on in your own team, or your own teams depending on what you’re doing. It doesn’t mean that you can’t be more motivational, inspirational. It doesn’t mean that you can’t work closely with your people. Maybe you can’t do everything, but you can do a lot. I don’t want people to think this is just for CEOs, or founders or entrepreneurs, or whatever. It’s absolutely not the case. As I said, I already have evidence that that’s not the case from people telling me about all kinds of Super bosses in their everyday lives that they’ve come across in their careers.

The second thing I am going to say is in those cases when you’re moving up and moving up, at some stage this becomes a barrier, the idea that we have more old fashioned management thinking here and becomes a barrier to you. Super bosses are going to do exactly what their proteges do, which is they’re going to go look for a new opportunity where they have the ability to really have a huge impact. As long as you’re a high performer, and you’re really good at managing the network, which by the way Super bosses are geniuses at, you would probably have a lot of those opportunities.

I am not saying you can never get boxed in. But I think the two things to keep in mind is number one: there’s so much you can do in the areas in which you have discretion, you have authority, you have the ability to do that, and number two: at some stage, if you have to leave you’ll leave because that’s part of the idea you’re going to go to wherever you need to go to fulfill your potential, and along the way you try to leave that legacy of helping other people get better.

You mentioned it is important to have a political skill to be able to do this. With some of these people that you mentioned here, stereotypically you’re required to have some interpersonal skills. Nonetheless people probably want to continue connecting with them because they’re successful, so I don’t know what the play-off is there.

Yeah, for a lot of the really well known people that I looked at, I think it becomes less of a political skill and it would become less of an issue because of what they’ve already accomplished. Is it more of an issue for someone who’s quite a bit lower in the organization? Well, there’s no question about it. The idea of managing up is not a new idea, and it requires tact and understanding of people and relationship skills. That’s no different whether we’re talking about super boss issues or not.

Lastly, I want to be clear about the network, and by network I’m thinking especially people outside of your own organization. I’m thinking about former employees and team members that have moved on to other other places, and your ability to stay in touch with them, your ability and willingness to learn from them, to keep up their relationship. I say somewhere in the book that when you work with a super boss there’s really no expiration date to that relationship that they’re staying in touch, and not just for any
social reasons. It’s not the only reason. Although that’s still a valuable reason. It’s because these are people that know them, and know where you’re coming from better than anyone. When you need advice, or you need to find some new talent, or you’re looking for a business opportunity, who could be better than some of these former proteges of yours that understand your contacts in your world so well, and will feel a tremendous sense of loyalty to you because of how you’ve helped them advance their career?

Yeah, absolutely. That’s fantastic. Syd, thank you very much indeed. I think we’ve all learn a great deal from your insights and your generosity in sharing them with us. So thank you very much.

Thanks Roddy. Really fun talking to you.