Differences between

BOSS ← Vs. → LEADE

es employees • Coaches employee

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Bosses vs. Leaders: Companies Need Neither
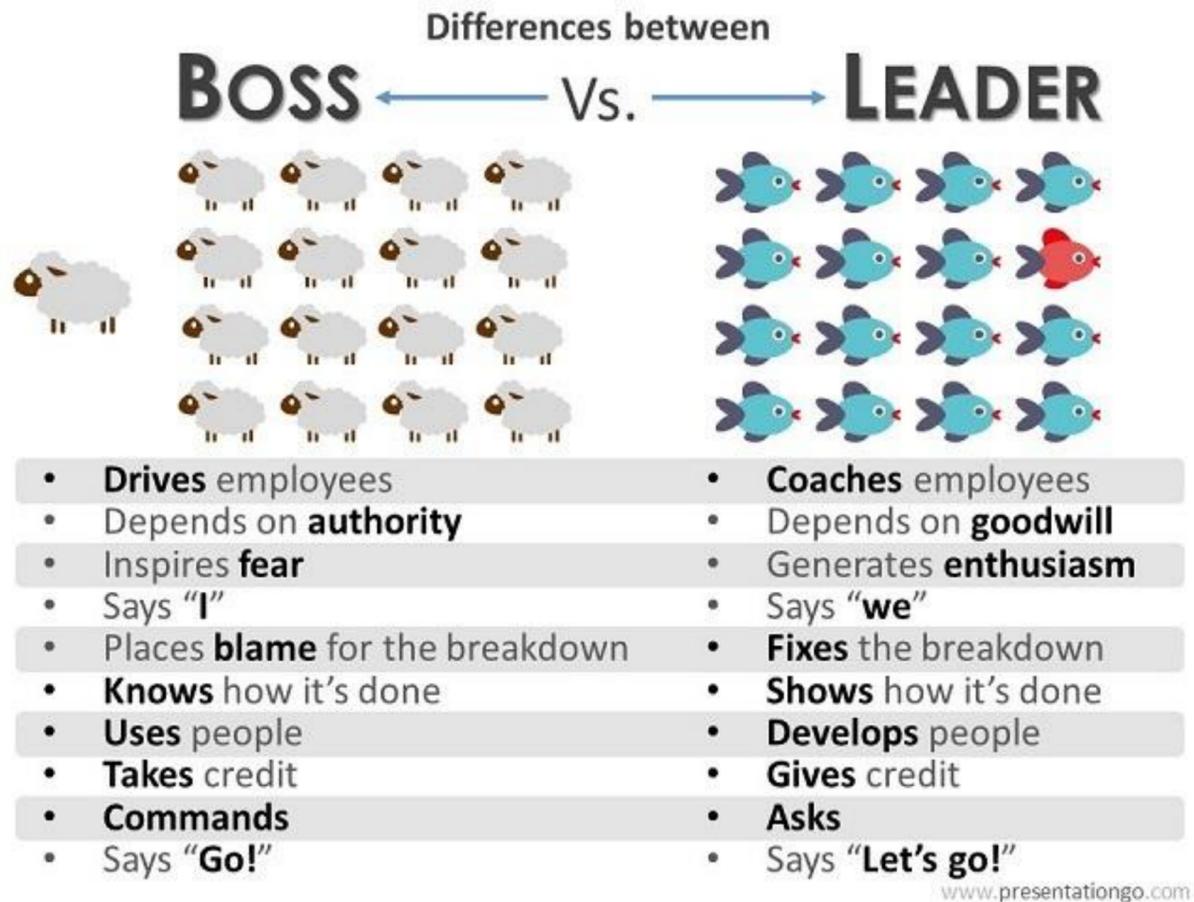
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Niels Pflaeging
Speaker. Advisor. Author. Influencer. Transformation Desi…

It was just a couple of hours ago that I saw an illustration here on my news stream on LinkedIn, about the differences between "the boss" and "the leader". Most of us have probably seen this kind of visual many times before: They invariably argue for "bosses becoming more like leaders", for "leaders becoming more transformational", or for companies to not have bosses altogether. Now, let´s look at this line of thinking a little bit closer.

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This is the complete "Boss vs. Leader" visual I encountered:

Differences between BOSS Vs. LEADER

BOSS	LEADER
• **Drives** employees	• **Coaches** employees
• Depends on **authority**	• Depends on **goodwill**
• Inspires **fear**	• Generates **enthusiasm**
• Says "**I**"	• Says "**we**"
• Places **blame** for the breakdown	• **Fixes** the breakdown
• **Knows** how it's done	• **Shows** how it's done
• **Uses** people	• **Develops** people
• **Takes** credit	• **Gives** credit
• **Commands**	• **Asks**
• Says "**Go!**"	• Says "**Let's go!**"

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The first thing that may come to mind is that both *bosses* and *leaders* are supposedly about work and relationships between *human beings*, but that people, in this kind of visual, are usually portrayed as animals. In this case, people are cast as *sheep* on the left, and as *fish on* the right. Which in itself is kind of insightful. In other visuals on the topic of leadership, we often find flocks of birds and swarms of ants used as metaphors for humans. Which is just as inspiring. *Dah.*

> *"People need not be given credit -*
> *they are not dogs."*

But let´s take a closer look at the *text* in the visual above. The left side obviously appears as quite abominable and is outlined as some sort of reign of terror. Which it is. But is the notion of "leaders" developed on the right side really so much better? **I don´t think so.** In fact, pretty much all assumptions made on the right side are highly problematic in the context of work, people and organizations. For instance:

- **People cannot actually be *coached from the top*** - coachees either choose their coaches, or it is not "coaching" at all!

- **People at work don´t need someone who *generates enthusiasm*** - that sounds more like constant pep talking, or like happy slavery.

- **People don´t need someone who *says we -*** it is outright obvious that a company, a firm or organization is not about individuals, but about creating-value-for-others-together-with-others.

- **People do not need *fixers of breakdowns*** - they are not children.

- **People need not *be developed -*** they can do that themselves.

- **People need not be *given credit*** - they are not dogs.

- **People do not need someone who _asks_** - they are able to think for themselves if we let them, and literally everyone should ask questions.

- **People need not hear _let´s go_ from someone within the organization** - there is always a customer for whom value is created.

The closer one observes the _"be a leader"_ propaganda, the more apparent it becomes that _being a leader_ is not about _leadership_ at all: It is still about dependency, steering, and command-and-control.

"Ultimately, the song of the Transformational Leader, the Great Leader, or Level 5 Leader is always about one ugly thing: Blaming."

Watch even closer, and you will find that, ultimately, the song of the "transformational leader", the "great leader", or "Level 5 leader" is inevitably about _blaming_. It is about blaming today´s managers for being either too stupid, too busy or too unwilling to lead their sheep- or fish-like people, so that the flocks stay out of trouble.

In short: The left side and the right side - they are _both_ fundamentally, and utterly flawed. The notion of _the leader_ is and has always been corrupt and despicable, just as the notion of bosses. Or put differently: If we think of leadership as depending on leaders & followers, or of leaders as "very special people", then we haven´t advanced a bit from what Frederick W. Taylor told us about managing for the industrial age, 105 years ago, in his treatise _Principles of Scientific Management_.

People are neither sheep, nor fish.
Leadership happens _in the space between people_ when market-driven self-organization is unleashed. It is not the job of bosses who may have been re-baptized as "leaders"!
So let´s end the hypocrisy. Together. And allow our organizations to become much more high-performing in the process.

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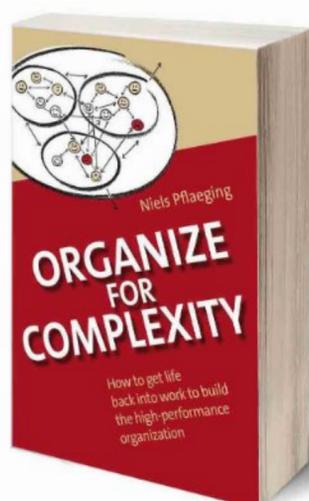
About the author: _Niels Pflaeging is the author of_ _Organize for Complexity, a visualized, dense and maybe even fun book on leadership, change & learning in the knowledge age. Niels is an entrepreneur, influencer, management exorcist, change curator,_ speaker, _author, and globally working advisor on leadership. He is founder of the open innovation movement_ BetaCodex Network, _and was a director with the Beyond Budgeting Round Table BBRT for five years._
For more about the topic of leadership in complexity, and about Niels´ work,

please visit his YouTube channel, read his papers at betacodex.org or on SlideShare. Niels also published a large number of articles here on LinkedIn.

Niels Pflaeging
Speaker. Advisor. Author. Influencer. Transformation Designer. Management Exorcist
36 Beiträge

17 Kommentare

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Keith Willett   ⋯   5 Monat
Cisco Executive

It took a bit to get the flow of this article, but the core message that leaders/managers/bosses should focus on the space between is critical! One of the CEO's I reported into would always remind us that our job was to manage the gaps, because the people are smart enough to deal with the other stuff. Thanks for reminding me of this and writing this article.

Gefällt mir   Antworten   👍 6   💬 1

Niels Pflaeging   ⋯   5 Monat
Speaker. Advisor. Author. Influencer. Transformation Designer. Management Exorcist

Thank you for this comment!

Gefällt mir   Antworten

Susan Basterfield   ⋯   4 Monat
Founding Partner at Enspiral Labs

Yes! Enough of patronizing BS of bewitching wordplay. We model what gives us joy and purpose. This is not a super power. It's a choice.

Gefällt mir   Antworten   👍 4   💬 1

Niels Pflaeging   ⋯   4 Monat
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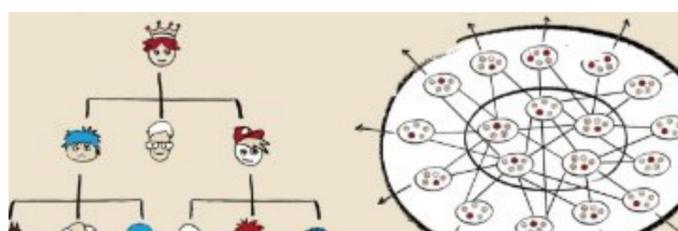
Thanks for your comment, Susan!

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