

# OVERCOMING AN *imperfect* BOSS

A Practical Guide to Building a Better Relationship with Your Boss



KARIN HURT

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FOREWORD

Dr. Henry P. Sims, Jr.

**K**arin’s deliberate choice of the word “boss” in her title is more than a bit ironic. I believe she may even hate the implications of the B word more than I do.

As I wrote in *Business Without Bosses*, when we use the word “boss,” we typically mean an individual who influences subordinate employees through such leader behaviors as command, instruction and top-down goal assignments, frequently accompanied by a healthy dose of reprimand and intimidation — a “Do it my way or else!” approach.

Bosses can generate compliance, especially in the short-term. They have a tendency to create “yes persons” who are willing to comply but lack initiative and creativity.

With a boss, the locus of innovation is always top-down. Subordinate employees seldom venture forth with their own creative ideas. Their mental powers are centered on trying to say and do as the boss wishes.

Instead, we need SuperLeaders: leaders who lead others to lead themselves.

I’ve watched Karin grow as a SuperLeader for over two decades. Even as an executive, she’s never been a “boss.” In fact, I’ve enjoyed her stories of the many “bosses” and other managers up, down and sideways whom she’s influenced to become stronger, empowering leaders.

Karin’s long track record of breakthrough results as an executive in sales, customer service, marketing, and human resources proves that SuperLeadership is worth fighting for, even when it means persuading your bosses to let you lead in style that scares them.

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The practical advice Karin shares in *Overcoming an Imperfect Boss* is a must-read for leaders yearning to make a deeper impact with their career. This book will help you to become the boss you wish you had.

Dr. Henry P. Sims, Jr.  
Professor Emeritus, University of Maryland

Coauthor of eight books, including: *Business Without Bosses*, *Company of Heroes*, *The New SuperLeadership* and *Share, Don't Take the Lead*.



## INTRODUCTION

I keep being asked why, of all the leadership topics I write and speak about, I would pick “imperfect bosses” as the topic of my first book. It’s quite simple: the supervisor relationship is the number one predictor of employee engagement and job satisfaction. Yet, most people screw up this powerful association.

The tragedy is that too many people leave the magic of what could be a game-changing relationship untapped. They follow traditional boss-subordinate protocol...they don’t get too close, don’t say too much, and don’t push the envelope. And so bosses come and go, and both parties muddle through. People do their best with the boss they’ve been given.

It doesn’t have to be that way.

Some of the bosses who once made me crazy grew to be lifelong mentors and friends. As I reflect on our journeys, each of these alliances had a transformation point. Something drove one or the other of us crazy, we talked about it, worked through it, and emerged with a deeper level of respect for one another

## **IMPERFECT BOSSES I HAVE KNOWN**

There was the Vice President that blew a gasket because of a stupid (yet fixable) mistake one of my employees had made. He screamed and yelled at me just minutes before I had to grab a microphone and give a motivational speech to my entire organization.

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I had choices. I could have become rattled and let his poor leadership choice screw up my ability to lead. Instead, I looked him in the eye and calmly shared, “I can see you’re really upset, and I’m sorry. We need to talk through what happened here and address it. But right now, I have hundreds of people waiting for inspiration. So please excuse me.” I turned around and left my office, not sure if I would have a job when I returned.

I gave my speech, fixed the mistake, and his entire demeanor changed. We never did discuss that outburst or what had triggered it. We didn’t need to. This “screamer” never raised his voice to me again, and became one of the best bosses and mentors I’ve ever had.

There was also the time I was running a large sales organization. I knew we needed to change the organizational structure and invest in additional headcount. I had a tight business case, and had proved out the trial concept, but my boss was worried about the political ramifications of doing something different than the other regions.

I told him, “I’m so confident that this will work that if it doesn’t, you can fire me.” Of course, that was highly risky, and I had to be prepared to walk away. But the depth of my passion and commitment led him to “yes.”

We blew away the results, and became the best sales team in the nation in that arena. Other regions followed our model.

## **THE IMPERFECT BOSS I HAVE BEEN**

Of course, sometimes I’m the imperfect one in need of reigning in.

Not long ago, I was going through a really tough couple of weeks. The cocktail of challenges was impacting our performance. We needed stronger results immediately. I didn’t realize how much my stress showed on the outside until a trusted leader on my team shared bluntly, “You’re changing.”

The words stung with fierce truth. He was right. Succumbing to the leadership squash sandwich, I was taking on familiar but unwelcome behaviors common in such scenes. I was showing up like the boss I'd refused to become.

I was worried about our mission, our cause, and our careers. My passion to protect my team had taken on an ironic intensity. My supportive style had morphed into frantic control. I began inviting myself to calls and requiring more rehearsals and executive readouts. Instead of trusting my competent team, I scrutinized each page of every PowerPoint deck.

My efforts to protect them from my stress had backfired.

*I had stopped leading like me.*

The words still echoing from the first conversation, my phone rang again. I now knew my team was tag-teaming this intervention.

“I joined this organization because I believe in your leadership. Your rare style works. Stay the course. We believe in you, in us, and the mission. Every one of us has your back. Just tell us what you need.”

There I was, a leader following the intervention of my team. They were coaching me back toward authenticity and it was wonderful.

My team reminded me that...

- Showing up tough is weak
- Servant leaders must also receive
- Great teams hold their leader accountable
- I want to know the truth
- Great leaders tell the truth
- Courage means staying true to your style
- My team needs me to lead like me

Over the years, I've had employees tell me how I've hurt their feelings, overlooked their efforts, embarrassed them, or over-reacted. Every one of those conversations has made us stronger, tighter, and more effective.

The most brave of these folks, the men and women who have given me the most stinging (and true) criticism, have grown into the closest of friends.

## THE IMPERFECT BOSS YOU HAVE

I know some of you are saying, “That may work well and good for you, but you’ve never met anyone quite like my boss, the big jerk.” Well, it’s possible, but not likely. I’ve known my share of Looney Tunes over the years. We’ll talk about that scene too.

This book is designed to empower you to tackle the most difficult situations with your boss, and to give you the courage and the techniques to invest more deeply in your relationship. Use the ideas and tools to help your boss become the boss you need, and to help you become the boss you wish you had.

*Overcoming an Imperfect Boss* is designed as an interactive working guide. Review the scenarios and jot down your ideas, complete the exercises, and share the survey with your boss.

If you’re also a boss, share the book with your team and have them help you.

If you’ve got tough scenes I’ve not covered here, drop me a line at [karin.hurt@letsgrowleaders.com](mailto:karin.hurt@letsgrowleaders.com) and let’s think them through together.

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CHAPTER 1

great expectations

One of my favorite bosses had such highs and lows that we gave her two nearly matching Barbie dolls for her desk. The first was immaculately dressed in typical Barbie fashion, matching shirt, shoes and pearls. The other doll wore ripped clothes, had magic marker on her face, and hair that looked like it had been eaten by a cat.

We chose a “good Barbie day” to approach her with our plan. Our request was that she put the doll out that best portrayed her mood as a warning sign. We knew if “evil” Barbie was lurking, we needed to lay low. Not ideal for sure. No one wants a moody boss.

And yet, she accepted the gift with a smile. She used the dolls, as requested, for our benefit. Thankfully, she got the point when one of us went to her shelf and switched the dolls.

She was a Customer Service VP who took a big chance on me, a pregnant HR Director who had never worked in a call center or led a large team. She offered me a customer service executive position, despite the fact that I would have to go out on maternity leave in the middle of my learning curve. Her immediate peer thought she was nuts.

She helped me learn, while giving me the freedom to lead. She tapped into my HR background and let me lead bigger projects that leveraged my skills. She threw a great baby shower, and hand-knitted a baby blue blanket for my son.

We both grew deeply in that relationship, and dramatically improved the business. With all that, I could accept a bit of grouchy from time to time.

I'm sure you have similar stories...

*"She had great vision, but I never knew exactly what she was thinking."*

*"I learned more that year than any time in my career, but he never supported me in a promotion."*

*"He really let me run my own show, but I doubt he knows what I really accomplished."*

*"He pushed me to take important risks, but he never got to know me personally."*

*"The work was exciting and fun, but she didn't respect any boundaries to create work-life balance."*

Take a moment to consider your favorite boss...

- What were his or her greatest strengths?
- What drove you crazy?
- What did you learn in working with his or her imperfections?
- How did you emerge stronger as a result?

The perfect boss is as elusive as the ideal mate. And yet, we're frustrated when our leaders fall short of our impossible expectations.

We long for leaders who will...

- Engage us in a compelling vision
- Have the utmost integrity
- Be authentic and transparent
- Treat us kindly and fairly
- Develop, mentor, and coach us
- Empower and trust us
- Communicate clearly
- Motivate us
- Be competent and knowledgeable
- Have a sense of humor





Bosses who think they're great, are the most frightening. It's usually the strongest leaders who have the lowest tolerance for their bosses' bumbles.

Strong leaders think, "I'd never treat MY team THAT way...which PROVES he's a jerk."

The truth is, he's just an imperfect human doing the best he can. Just like you.

### **WHY IT'S HARD**

The boss-subordinate relationship is unnatural by design. We sell our power for money. We look to a person we have not chosen (whom we may or may not respect) for affirmation, evaluation, and reward.

In order to "succeed," we strive to figure out what will make this guy like us, and adjust our style accordingly. We take every criticism to heart, even when we don't believe it.

We take this already unnatural structure and impose even more awkward performance feedback systems.

Imagine if we burdened our home relationships with some of the same formal systems we impose at work.

"Honey, I've decided to give you an end-of-year appraisal. Your cooking's improved and you're taking out the trash without being reminded, you get an A in housework. But you've been so stressed lately; I have to give romance a B-."

We wouldn't even consider that stunt with our kids, where we have more power.

If such tactics wouldn't work with people who know and love us, why would we imagine they would enhance trust at work?

And so I offer these stories and wisdom based on years of being an imperfect boss and learning from the many imperfect bosses I've had the pleasure to know.



ABOUT

*the author*

**K**arin Hurt, CEO of Let's Grow Leaders, is an experienced executive, speaker, and writer with a diverse background in sales, marketing, customer service, merger integration, training, and organizational and leadership development.

She was recently named to the top 100 thought leaders in Trusted Business Behavior by Trust Across America, and Multiplier of the Year, by the Wiseman Group. Her award-winning blog, Let's Grow Leaders, was named #17 of the top 100 most socially shared leadership blogs.

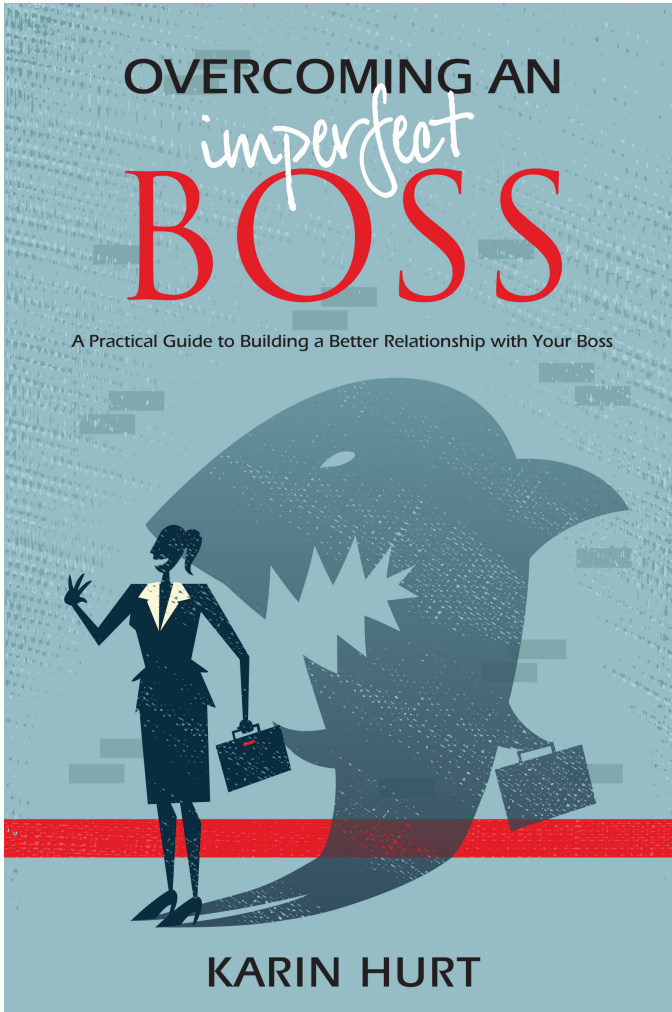
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