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Superbosses: How Exceptional Leaders Master the Flow of Talent, by Sydney Finkelstein, Portfolio/Penguin, New York, 2016, 272 pp., $28.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9781591847830

Inspired by the knowledge that some of the most highly regarded talent in the restaurant industry had not all been trained by the same prestigious culinary arts university, but had instead been mentored by a creative and energetic entrepreneur, Sydney Finkelstein was curious whether this story was an anomaly or an insight into how industry talent is identified and developed universally. Exploring a variety of industries, Finkelstein found that a disproportionate share of top-level talent "had once worked for or had been mentored by one or a few talent spawners" (p. 3). He calls these cultivators of talent "superbosses." Though he never gives a concise definition of "superbosses," Finkelstein describes them as powerful mentors who employ aspects of transformational leadership (Bass, 1995), and also engage in somewhat unconventional leadership practices. Most importantly, he says, "superbosses" can be identified by the extensive network of talent that they've developed. Since the subtle details that differentiate "superbosses" from traditional leaders and mentors are difficult to distinguish, Finkelstein employed a team to assist with extensive qualitative investigations that would allow his research to benefit from the insight of industry insiders. The result was a series of integrated case study snippits that collectively illustrate what he argues is a new perspective on the role of leadership in talent propagation.

Superbosses is the latest installment in an extensive body of research by Finkelstein. His work has appeared in publications such as the *Academy of Management Journal, Organization Science, Administrative Science Quarterly*, and *Strategic Management Journal*. He is the author of 17 books, including *Why Smart Executives Fail, Think Again*, and *Breakout Strategy*. Finkelstein received his PhD from Columbia University and is currently the Steven Roth Professor of Management, director of the Tuck Executive Program, and faculty director for the Tuck Center for Leadership at Dartmouth College.

This book is the result of a 10-year study. Finkelstein started by using inductive methods of data collection to find potential "superbosses." Using a balance of quantitative and qualitative analysis, he identified a sample of 18 leaders who were responsible for generating a disproportionate share of talent in their industries and called them "superbosses." This sample included 16 White males, one Black male, and one White female. Finkelstein addresses this lack of diversity, noting that it is reflective of "white men's traditional dominance of top leadership roles" (p. 10). The sample had nine leaders who launched their careers by founding their own businesses. Of the remaining nine leaders Finkelstein identified as "superbosses," only two managed in the corporate world. The rest were from the fields of entertainment, media, and athletics. This is consistent with Finkelstein's observation that the type of organizational camaraderie that most "superbosses" consider to be crucial to success is often absent in corporate environments. While a sample of 18 can be rather large for a theory-building qualitative study (Eisenhardt, 1989), the composition of this sample raises some questions about the boundary conditions for which Finkelstein's theory will be applicable.

Data collection for this study involved more than 200 interviews and reviews of thousands of articles, books, and magazines. Since this study attempts to build a theory focusing on leadership behaviors that should result in the successful development of subordinates, it may be more appropriate to consider the versatility of the theory than its actual generalizability (Van de Ven, 2007). To help illustrate the versatility (basic applicability of core concepts) of his theory, Finkelstein incorporates more than 300 examples of "superboss" behaviors into this book, with approximately 25 of these examples providing enough detail for the reader to feel truly immersed in the narrative. The vast majority of these examples come from each of the 18 "superbosses," but he also utilizes several that come from people whom he calls "likely superbosses." While some may question why Finkelstein includes data from "likely superbosses," it is consistent with his assertion that becoming a "superboss" is more about executing behaviors than it is about inherent personal traits.

Finkelstein argues that what makes the concept of "superbosses" particularly intriguing is the recognition that their individual characteristics and leadership styles are often so unique that it seems as if "superbosses" have nothing in common at all. What they do share, he says, is an authentic nature that leads them to be open, supports commitment to their visions, and serves as an inspiration to employees. By describing the stark contrast between the leadership of jazz musician Miles Davis and business executive Michael Miles, he illustrates how two very different methods of interacting with people can lead to the same successful development of individual talent.

According of Finkelstein, part of what makes "superbosses" so effective at developing talent is their commitment to hiring the right people. Finkelstein uses the example of Ralph Lauren hiring a woman on the spot in a restaurant because he was impressed with her fashion style to show how "superbosses" utilize unconventional methods for procuring talent. He states that these bosses often ignore résumés, conduct unstructured interviews, and place little emphasis on established measures of competence because "they want candidates whose abilities are so special, no one would think to test them" (p. 42). He argues that the executives he studied are willing to take risks in hiring because they prioritize finding extraordinary people over simply filling positions.

Finkelstein says that "superbosses" hire intelligent and imaginative individuals so that the organization can reap the benefits of their capabilities; unlike many other bosses, he says that they are rigid on their visions as they pertain to outcomes, but flexible on the processes used to achieve these visions. Finkelstein claims that "superbosses" are so committed to exploring new paths to realizing their visions that they not only encourage employees to take risks, but they embrace failure as a rite of passage. This is why, he says, restaurateur Norman Brinker openly discussed his own failures with employees.

He goes on to describe how "superbosses" customize their approaches based upon individual differences, treating each protégé like a client whose needs must be met, distinguishing between times when they will benefit from guidance and when they will thrive on autonomy. After conveying how closely Norman Brinker and George Lucas worked with employees in companies of very different sizes and structures, Finkelstein quotes several of their former protégés who recounted the freedom they were given in their jobs. Furthermore, he argues that employees thrive under this responsibility because not only are they accountable for their performance, but they receive the accolades for their successes, which, he claims, actually helps to build teamwork. He uses the example of Marvel Comics writer Stan Lee introducing artist credits to his comics as a way of sharing the glory with his people and reinforcing their collective value to the organization. He cites numerous examples of "superbosses" using unorthodox tactics such as long hours, physical isolation of teams, social interaction outside of work, and internal competition as strategies to strengthen teams. While it may seem counterintuitive that internal competition could strengthen teamwork, Finkelstein describes the competitive environment that Lorne Michaels created on *Saturday Night Live* to illustrate how competition can strengthen relationships by helping team members achieve their collective vision of excellence.

This strengthened teamwork, however, does not necessarily lead to increased employee retention because "superbosses" often inspire their best workers to grow beyond what the organization can foster. Finkelstein addresses this apparent paradox stating that these leaders "regard the departure of their very best talent as a natural stage of growth and something to be accepted, if not warmly embraced" (p. 174). He uses the example of restaurateur Alice Waters preparing menus at a former protégé's restaurant to show how "superbosses" continue to serve in mentorship roles even after a formal employment arrangement no longer exists. Finkelstein argues that the strong relationships fostered by "superbosses" tend to manifest themselves through the emergence of professional networks that help legitimize the credentials of protégés in the job market. This impact that "superbosses" have on not only their own firms, but industry as a whole, is what Finkelstein believes elevates them beyond the status of simply being good leaders or effective mentors.

While this book provides valuable insights into how leaders can become highly regarded developers of industry talent, it is not without its limitations. Context is an important aspect to understanding behavior in a qualitative study (Miles & Huberman, 1994), but the vast majority of the behavioral examples that Finkelstein uses provide minimal context for the reader. For instance, he utilizes an example of "Norman Brinker's former CFO report[ing] that she'd see him in restaurants picking up a dishrag and bussing tables" (p. 111). Now consider two different possible contexts in which Brinker could have displayed this behavior: (1) Brinker was eating with his family and the restaurant got busy; (2) Brinker was showing a general manager his standards during a routine visit. In each of these possible contexts, Brinker's behavior would have distinctly different meanings, but the reader is unaware of the context within which this behavior takes place. Also, while the variety of industries Finkelstein incorporates into the study contributes to the versatility of the theory, it creates challenges when interpreting the meaning of behaviors. For example, Finkelstein uses multiple examples of athletic coaches taking input from assistants during games to illustrate a "superboss" behavior; while this may be a "superboss" behavior in other contexts, it is actually quite common within the context of athletics (Branch, 2013). Additionally, Finkelstein provides many examples of situations where the behaviors he describes worked, but because his sample was built by identifying potential "superbosses" and analyzing their behavior, the study provides no information about leaders who have performed similar actions and failed. This is a critical limitation since "the superboss methods of spotting desirable employees may feel risky and dangerous" (p. 58). Finkelstein attempts to resolve this concern by citing the success of "superbosses" discussed in his book, but does not acknowledge the potential for discrimination to occur as a result of these methods, nor does he discuss the potential legal implications of such hiring practices. Finally, the extensive use of informal terms such as "superboss" and "glorious bastards" tends to detract from the important message that Finkelstein is communicating.

Despite these limitations, the book could be applicable to practice. Finkelstein does an excellent job explaining how the practices embraced by "superbosses" can be applied by managers. He closes each chapter with a series of both suggestions and reflective questions that can be used to help integrate the techniques of "superbosses" into a manager's repertoire of leadership tools. For example, he closes his chapter on hiring with the advice that "When you're first beginning to experiment with the superboss approach, don't make every person you hire an unorthodox pick. Start with just one or two hires and work from there" (p. 57). The final chapter of the book is dedicated to discussing how to maximize the benefits of working with "superbosses," how to become a "superboss," and how to develop an organizational culture that promotes the "superboss" approach. In this chapter, Finkelstein relates his theory of "superbosses" to his own personal experiences, helping the reader to see that these concepts that were discussed within the context of executives should have relevance to other leaders within the organization as well. He recognizes, however, that midlevel managers may face challenges applying some of the practices described in this book, as he says that "the culture of our organizations often seems like a formidable force working against [mid-level leaders]" (p. 203). He is also aware that while the framework of "superbosses" may be versatile, certain behaviors may not work within every context. Consequently, he recommends that rather than trying to execute the entire "superboss" playbook, leaders should only embrace the "superboss" behaviors that will work within the constraints of their organizational structure and do so one step at a time.

Application in the business classroom is not quite as clear, however, since many of the procedures Finkelstein describes give the appearance of conflicting with traditional human resource practices. For instance, his examples of Jay Chiat banning corporate memos or Gene Roberts eliminating staff meetings could be interpreted as having the potential to restrict organizational communication and limit the diversity of input into decision making. Having said that, the paradoxical nature of integrating this text into lessons based on traditional leadership practices could lead to a rather intriguing discussion. Imagine delivering a detailed presentation to your class on the value of the structured interview and then contrasting it with Finkelstein's narrative about an executive hiring a candidate after an impromptu conversation in the waiting room. Such a dialogue could truly engage students.

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