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| WORK

YOUR NEXT BOSS MAY BE MORE OF A COACH THAN A DICTATOR

More direct reports and less administrative work will push managers to go from authority figures skilled at the business to ‘social-emotional experts’



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No matter how much the office has changed, the trope of the boss has endured: Someone who put in years climbing the ranks or leapt between companies, propelled by triumphs in revenue growth. The best at charming new clients or closing deals. The manager with the final say on team objectives and your performance review. The person who could say without a hint of sympathy, “Yeah, I’m going to need you to come in on Saturday.”

Is it time for that boss to go extinct?

Cost-cutting measures first implemented during the financial crisis mean that the average boss today has twice the number of direct reports as a manager in the early aughts, according to [Gartner](#), a research and advisory company—a trend that management experts predict will continue after the coronavirus pandemic. At the same time, an increasing number of tasks that once ate up a manager’s time, such as auditing and approving expense reports, has been automated.

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And as the conditions under which the boss operates have shifted—fewer managers, more reports, less administrative work—a new model is emerging. This boss is a coach, not a dictator; a mentor, but not necessarily because of experience with sales or programming. Where previous leaders may have sought to stand out, these managers excel at fostering collaboration. It is possible they will be younger than you are, with less industry experience.

“Managers going forward are going to be less technical experts and more social-emotional experts, to help employees navigate the culture of the organization,” says Brian Kropp, chief of human resources research at Gartner. He expects that managers will continue overseeing increasing numbers of employees in coming years, as the past decade’s trend is accelerated by [organizational changes driven by the coronavirus pandemic](#), including remote work.

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Bosses in previous generations, he says, tended to be excellent individual contributors who were promoted to management positions so they could teach teams. It was a model that functioned effectively as long as the rate of change in the workplace remained low. With technology such as automation and artificial intelligence expected to replace nearly 70% of a manager’s workload by 2024, according to research by Gartner, work will continue to become more about idea generation and developing talent. Without the need to devote as much time to business tasks, managers will increasingly focus on coaching employees and providing emotional support.

“The line, ‘Because I said so’ is pretty much extinct,” says Joseph Fuller, professor of management practice at Harvard Business School and co-lead of the school’s Managing the Future of Work initiative.

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As the role of the manager shifts from authority figure to nurturer, he says, [winning workers over](#) on everything from the company’s record on fossil fuel consumption to policies around contractors—rather than issuing directives—will continue to gain importance. It is

management behavior that originated primarily from large, publicly traded companies and, though not yet observable in all industries, is cascading down to smaller organizations, Mr. Fuller says.

The changing job description of a boss and increased expectations from workers means a different type of employee will be considered management material. Those with highly developed social abilities, including “the capacity to interact with an unfamiliar person effectively, good listening skills, real-time processing skills,” will pull ahead, says Mr. Fuller. “Over time, this keeps gaining share relative to technical skills.”

This will prove especially true in virtual environments, where the ability to gain employee trust and engagement over digital platforms will become crucial. “The way you get a ‘great place to work’ label is mainly the questions that are focused on trust,” says Sunnie Groeneveld, managing partner of Inspire 925, a Zurich-based consulting firm that works with companies undergoing digital transformations, and an associate dean at HWZ University. “Do I use technology to try to do my best to create a great workplace? Or do I use technology to get all the analytics and control someone’s professional life?”

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That means that how managers learn will need to change, too. Ms. Groeneveld says that while management training has traditionally focused on educating leaders to run the business, increasingly it needs to be geared toward training executives to manage through, and in some cases drive, rapid change.

“Everybody has a different level of comfort when it comes to undergoing change,” says Ms. Groeneveld. Managers will need to ask themselves, “What can I do as a leader to make it a more or less positive experience?” she says. “The tools it takes to achieve that are often the tools of a coach and less the tools of a commander.”

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