

Are you a good boss? Or, do you have a good boss? I have not worked abroad and so can hardly make a comparison between corporate superior-subordinate relationships in Japan and foreign countries. But, at least in Japan, such relationships hold an important position in any organization. We are reminded of this when we go to a bookshop. The shelves of business books are filled with titles purporting to teach how to get along well with subordinates, or how to discern good-for-nothing superiors.

Ceaseless publication of these how-to business books testifies to the fact that there are a great number of businesspeople who cannot hit it off well with colleagues at work or who have trouble relating to people.

Some of the titles of these books are given below at random (with my comments in parentheses):

“Superiors Must Take off Pants First Ahead of Subordinates” (I can hardly do so if told to at short notice); “Superiors Who Destroy Subordinates” (Both sides are to blame in many cases); “Unpleasant Guys in Your Workplace” (Is it me? Or that fellow must be one of them); “Why Top Executives in Your Company Are Incompetent” (Surprised to learn of such branding suddenly).



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What Is a Good Boss?

By **Shinichi OGATA**

Among these books, most of which made me nearly sick even at a glance, one title caught my eye: “A Boss’ Hazy Feeling.” Its wraparound band says the book is a collection of questions and answers regarding corporate life. Answers were given in whispers off the record by middle-level managers of companies. The author is Yuzo Shimizu, chief executive officer of a company which makes personality tests used by businesses in the recruitment or promotion of employees. Over the past 20 years, he interviewed managers of various companies and took down in his notebook the grumbles and complaints inadvertently uttered by them. He says he published the book based on their remarks in order to help cheer up corporate managers.

If you read the book, you can see what troubles corporate managers have and what they really want to do. Their questions or answers are like this: “I want to have yes-men around me. Is it not advisable?” or “I want to tell my subordinates to go Dutch when I eat or drink with them. But I don’t know how to say what I want to.” These and other questions in particular are pitiable but quite interesting.

To the question “What is a good boss?” the book offers the following answers: 1) A boss under whom you benefit from working, 2) a boss who says and does what stands to reason and keeps your mental health in order, and 3) a boss who

makes you perfectly happy to work with. These answers appear to be universal and convincing indeed, even though it is not clear how many such bosses there are in Japanese companies. To my mind, a good boss is one who is good at saying great things about his subordinates.

From my long experience as a subordinate and short experience as a superior, I can say that when a problem occurs between a superior and a subordinate, the problem can hardly be solved if the boss only points it out, however correctly. This is because both the superior who singles it out and the subordinate facing the finger-pointing feel awkward alike and so the problem is rarely settled ever. Nothing good can be gained from that sort of exchange.

What is required of superiors is to speak highly of subordinates whenever they do a good job. This is to send a signal that “I am paying attention to what you are doing.” Such steady efforts are rewarded when a serious problem occurs.

Japanese workers have traditionally been loyal to their companies. Their loyalty is weakening, however, with the lifetime employment system on the verge of collapse. Workers so loyal as to devote themselves to their bosses are already in the minority. Even so, good relationships between superiors and subordinates are still important to ensure a pleasant work environment for both sides every day.

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