

HBR CAREER MANAGEMENT BLOG

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HOW TO CHECK REFERENCES ON A PROSPECTIVE BOSS

All HBR readers want to work for “good” bosses. But what is the definition of “good boss?” And how will you know you are in the presence of one?

A “good” boss combines “power” with “decency.”

That is a rare mixture. And that is why there are so few good bosses.

Power is defined as the ability to make things happen. Potential power is defined as someone who is perceived as on a fast track to get real power.

Hitch your wagon to powerful boss’ star and you move up as the boss moves up. Power by association.

Hitch you wagon to a boss on a permanent power plateau and you inherit organizational impotence by association with such a person.

The word decency is defined as someone who is guided by a moral or ethical standard and compromises that standard with great internal pain. We are not talking about saints. We are talking about avoiding people whose True North is “what’s in my best interests this quarter.”

QUESTIONS TO ASK

Having defined “power” and “decency,” how do you know if the prospective boss sitting across from you at the job interview coffee table has the required characteristics?

The best way to determine power or potential power is to speak with current subordinates and ask, “Tell me about this person’s ability to make things happen?” It is not all that important what is said. What is important is how they react once you ask this question! You want to see people smile, remain relaxed and to say positive things. With powerful bosses, subordinates are quick to provide specific examples. If people do not smile at the question and begin talking in generalities, that is a bad sign.

The second question focuses on decency. I suggest you ask the prospective boss, "If I spoke with your direct reports what would they say about you?"

The best answer is, "good question. Why don't you speak with them? I will set it up for you." Be wary of, "I am sure they will say I am firm but fair..." and then fail to set up the meetings.

Be grateful if the prospective boss turns you down for the job because you had the temerity to ask the above question. You got a clear negative response to the decency question and dodged a bullet at the same time!

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