

How to Be a Boss WSJ 050919

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/like-a-boss-a-college-course-for-first-time-managers-11557394206>

### **Like a Boss: A College Course for First-Time Managers**

Wharton's 'How to Be the Boss' teaches the gritty realities of managing; how to handle a note found in the trash [Chip Cutter](#) May 9, 2019 5:30 a.m. ET

A scenario had flashed on the screens in "How to Be the Boss," a new undergraduate course at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, outlining a smelly dilemma. An employee complained that another co-worker reeked, making it all but impossible to work in the same area. Students had to play the part of a manager tasked with solving the problem.

"What would you do?" Mr. Cappelli asked. "This is a really difficult problem."

One student suggested bringing in air freshener or a candle. Another proposed that the manager sit down with the worker, probing to see if depression or a medical issue was to blame for a hygiene problem. As the discussion continued, Mr. Cappelli pointed out that managers shouldn't simply take the complaining employee's word. It's possible this worker spoke up because of a grudge against the colleague, not because of any odor, he added.

A good supervisor would have to confirm the complaint with their own nose. Then, they should deftly raise the issue with the employee, while not outing the co-worker who complained. "I would be as gentle as possible on this," he said.

If students needed a reminder that day-to-day management can be complicated—and frequently absurd—the scenario made it clear.

Launched in January, "How to Be the Boss" is full of practical lessons aimed at building better managers out of people largely in their 20s. That the course is focused on undergraduates—and not those seeking a traditional master of business administration degree—is by design.

Mr. Cappelli and others in the business world have picked up on an emerging but acute problem: As more young people graduate and take roles at technology companies and consulting firms, many quickly find themselves in leadership positions with little to no training about how to deal with direct reports.

"Companies have basically gutted their efforts to train supervisors," Mr. Cappelli says, with some graduates now supervising two years out of school. "They're doing it younger and they're doing it with no training."

The course covers the fundamentals of employment law, plus strategies for hiring and firing employees, delivering performance reviews and motivating a team. Lessons range from how to supervise people your parents' age to tactics for responding to sexual harassment.

One of the biggest surprises for sophomore Joshita Varshney is how much time bosses spend on actual managing—more than focusing on the projects that defined their earlier roles.

The course relies on mock scenarios in addition to traditional lectures. In one role-playing exercise, senior Brandon Tepper acted as a manager who had discovered that one of his star employees who was scheduled to attend a work conference actually intended to spend most of that time on personal activities. Complicating matters, the manager realized this after finding a note in the employee's trash can.

“How do I reveal this information?” Mr. Tepper wondered.

He opened the conversation with praise for this worker's past performance and an open-ended question: “Is there anything wrong in the workplace that you'd like to discuss?” The employee, played by a fellow student, said he felt he was working harder than others, and needed time off. The conversation flowed naturally, and Mr. Tepper said he was mindful not to censure the student or upset him without learning more.

When he wanted to understand the motivations for going to the conference, Mr. Tepper again chose a broad question: “I see you have this conference on your schedule. What do you plan to accomplish there?” As the exercise continued, the employee admitted to booking the conference to get personal time with a friend, and Mr. Tepper never had to reveal that he found a note in a trash can.

Exercises like this one can help students determine the underlying issues that may be driving an employee's behavior, Mr. Cappelli said. But not all the discussions went smoothly. When the class came together for a debrief of their experiences, some students in the manager role had canceled the trip altogether and some even ended up firing their employee.

Getting sucked into a therapist-like role is another big potential pitfall for first-time managers, Mr. Cappelli warned his class. It's important to understand there are boundaries to being a supervisor and some situations must be referred to HR or legal departments, he added.

Time is also finite, Mr. Cappelli likes to remind students. He raised the example of an employee who had repeatedly underperformed. Many in the class instinctively want to do all they can to help the person improve, but he pushed them and asked: “How much of your week over the next year are you willing to spend holding the guy's hand?”

Students say they've come away with practical lessons. Senior Deanna Taylor found the section covering best practices for managing older workers to be revelatory. The course advised students to stay humble when overseeing more experienced staff and, more generally, not to make too many changes to the team at once.

Most of the students said the course had given them a window into what bosses go through, a different set of training than other courses, where students are typically taught to work with their colleagues as peers.

Employers applaud the idea of teaching undergrads the basics of being a boss before they leave college.

“I’m such a fan,” says Katie Burke, chief people officer of HubSpot, a software company based in Cambridge, Mass. She learned to give difficult feedback by repeatedly practicing on other students during an M.B.A. class at the MIT Sloan School of Management, but says there is no reason younger students can’t learn about supervising others.

Sophomore Joy Cai said Mr. Cappelli’s class led her to tweak her behavior at a student credit union where she works. She had been cc’ing her boss on many emails, wanting to show what she was doing on the job. When she asked Mr. Cappelli about that practice, he told her, “That annoys bosses.”

If students better understand what’s required of managers and have greater empathy for their own future bosses, Mr. Cappelli said he’s done his job. “Supervisors are the connection employees have to an organization,” he said. “They’re really crucial to retaining people.”

### **Can You Manage?**

Here are five lessons, big and small, from the Wharton course

#### **As a boss, you are not a “super employee.”**

One mistake first-time supervisors make is assuming they should be doing all the tasks of their previous jobs, in addition to managing their teams. “You’re not supposed to be a super employee,” Mr. Cappelli says. “You have different job requirements.”

#### **Before you make a decision, consider how you’ll explain it.**

Bosses will be called upon to defend their decisions, some of which may be unpopular. Before making a tough call, ask yourself: “How would I explain this to someone else?” Mr. Cappelli recommends. Thinking about the explanation in advance will lead to better decisions.

#### **Let subordinates know what you don’t understand.**

Make it clear to your team that you respect their expertise by asking them questions—even if you think you know the answer—and by thanking staffers for their contributions, “even if they are just doing their job,” Mr. Cappelli says.

#### **Don’t take the credit—and watch what happens.**

It’s remarkable what can be accomplished when bosses let others get the praise. “You’ll get a ton more stuff done,” Mr. Cappelli says.

#### **Buy the first drink and go home.**

Bosses should socialize with their employees, but never linger. Mr. Cappelli’s rule for after-work events is to buy the first round of drinks, then quickly leave. “You’re not their peer,” he says.