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Barry Jenner is a Chartered Accountant and Management Consultant specialising in improving the profitability of road transport and associated businesses.

Being a manager is always challenging but more so at present. It is painful to have to put people off and many managers are operating outside their comfort zone.

Robert Sutton, writing in the June 2009 Harvard Business Review says that “bosses tend to be oblivious to their followers’ perspectives and mentions an experiment supporting that view. He goes on to describe how bosses become more focused on their own needs and wants; become less focused on others’ needs, wants and actions and act as if written and unwritten rules that others are expected to apply don’t apply to them.

Even worse, bosses believe they are aware of every important development in the organization, even when they are ignorant of key facts. Sutton explains that this is known as “the fallacy of centrality” – “the assumption that because one holds a central position, one automatically knows everything necessary to exercise effective leadership.”

Sutton explains how followers devote energy to watching and worrying about “even the smallest and most innocent moves their superiors make.” People tend to interpret what they see their boss do in a negative light; i.e. they assume the worst. Can you recall when you were a follower of examples of negative signals from your boss? If you are a boss, can you recall when you might have inadvertently sent the wrong message to followers?

Sutton notes that in stressful times people have a great need for “predictability, understanding, control and compassion.” So, any major change should have an explanation of why it is necessary and the effect it will have with plenty of detail. Bosses also need to keep repeating the message.

Closed door meetings may be necessary but they need to be followed with longer open door times. Everything that can be communicated should be done in writing and face to face. Show concern, be optimistic where warranted and look people in the eye. Sutton tells how to make the best of a bad situation. “If shocks are preceded by fair warnings, people not only have time to brace themselves but also get chances to breathe easy.”

With a big challenge, break it down into “small win” opportunities. Where you are unable to give people much influence over what happens, “at least give them a say in how it happens. A good boss will find ways to recognize accomplishments even if they are only small.

“Remember a boss delivering bad news is, by definition, at a later point in the emotional cycle of reacting to it.” That means a boss must put him or herself in the other person’s shoes and express empathy and even sorrow for any painful decisions that have had to be taken.

Great bosses have open doors and have one on one meetings at all levels of the company but are careful not to undermine their managers. They reward loyalty and build up their people who show real commitment. Performance can be rewarded not just with money but by responsibility and the status that comes from the attention of the boss. They insist on excellence and hold people accountable.

If you are a boss, how do you need to change your behaviour and become more focused of the needs of others and become a better boss? What action do you need to take now?

Barry Jenner is a profit and business improvement specialist. Email: [bjenner@mindshop.com.au](mailto:bjenner@mindshop.com.au) or phone 0418 821 183 any time.