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If You Don't *Want* To Influence Others, You Can't Lead

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The stereotypical bad boss is one who marches through the workplace barking orders left and right. But there's another type we've probably all experienced at one time or another: bosses who don't do what they need to do.

They provide no direction or guidance. What they want or expect isn't clear. They're distant, unapproachable. They can't or won't make choices (http://hbr.org/2006/01/conquering-a-culture-of-indecision/ar/1) . The list could go on and on.

It's not that these bosses don't know what to do. It's more basic than that. They're not *willing* to do what the job requires. They lack something — some spark, some urge, some need — that's obvious when absent.

When he was running a small division years ago, a manager we know, Christien (not his real name), promoted Laura to head a small group of designers. Almost immediately, Laura faced a major challenge.

The division had just introduced a line of products aimed at an important new market segment. Since the company sold primarily through direct marketing, the design of such materials as catalogs — and, increasingly, web pages — had a direct impact on sales. And sales were below forecast.

In the flurry of analysis and research that followed those early results, a major dispute erupted between product developers and the design group. The sales materials for the new products were too "artsy," the developers said. A prospective customer had to study them carefully to understand the product and its benefits, and few prospects would do that. As one developer said, "The designers are trying to win design awards, not sell product. This isn't about projecting some image. It's about moving the goods."

Laura clearly felt trapped in the middle. She didn't deny many of the developers' claims, which were backed up with data from interviews and focus groups. But "if developers had their way," she told Christien, "they'd cover every catalog with starbursts and the words 'NEW' and 'SAVE MONEY' with lots of exclamation points. No competent, self-respecting designer will do that. If I force my designers to do it, they'll leave their talent at home and do horrible work — until they find another job. And I'll lose whatever confidence they have in my design sense. If that happens, I'll be useless to them and you."

When Christien stressed the need to find some resolution, she asked him to sit in on her next meeting with the designers.

In the meeting, where Christien listened and observed more than he spoke, Laura mostly moderated the discussion as designers complained about the "idiots" in development who knew nothing about good design. She clearly expected Christien to deliver the "your work on these products is unacceptable and you *must* change" message (http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2009/10/how_to_deliver_bad_news_to_a_g.html) to her people.

He did not, and the meeting ended without resolution, except that now Christien understood he had two problems. First, of course, there was the need for better marketing materials, but it was clear as well that Laura lacked something required of all managers — the fundamental will or need to influence others. She was unwilling to press her people to take a new and different course.

In our experience, a surprising number of managers share this reluctance. Their reasons can vary. Some will do most anything to avoid conflict or disagreement (http://blogs.hbr.org/ashkenas/2010/08/is-your-culture-too-nice.html) ; indeed, they see the manager as the one who maintains a harmonious workplace. Others are reluctant to do anything that might threaten or upset their personal relationships; their need to be liked dominates their behavior. In Laura's case, she still saw

herself as a designer, not a manager. She was reluctant to put at risk her colleagues' professional opinion of her.

Why, then, do such people become managers? Most of all, they don't understand what the role will require of them. They like the status and income that come from rising in a hierarchy. But until they get past whatever is keeping them from a willingness to influence proactively the behavior of others (http://blogs.hbr.org/baldoni/2008/06/leaders_need_to_sell.html) , they won't be fully effective. Effective managers are sensitive to, and caring of, people — they know that why and how they exert influence matter greatly — but behind everything they do is this fundamental need to shape and change what others do and the thoughts and feelings that drive their actions.

Ask yourself: *Do I want to influence others (http://blogs.hbr.org/hmu/2008/02/the-language-of-persuasion.html) ? Am I ready and willing to do so?* This is the most fundamental task that managers and leaders perform. If you will not or cannot do it, if it makes you uncomfortable, if other needs — to be liked, for example — feel more compelling, you will struggle as a boss.