

# Management Today



## LEADERSHIP LESSONS

# How to stretch people without pushing them too far

The leaders that made me: Good bosses never just give you the answers, says Andrew Barraclough, GSK's VP Design.

by [Stephen Jones](#)

There is no hard and fast method behind 'good' leadership. Despite both deploying different styles - one voracious and pushy, the other more laissez faire - Steve Jobs and Warren Buffett both grew world-changing businesses.

It's about knowing how to get the best out of those that are around you in order to deliver the task at hand.

Andrew Barraclough has experienced a variety of leadership types during his career at RB and now FTSE 100 pharma giant GlaxoSmithKline. There are three things, the VP for Global design says, that the best have always done.

They listen, they stretch you beyond what you think you can achieve and fundamentally they never give you the answer.

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"When I took on a new role as strategy lead at Reckitt Benckiser my boss Anish Gupta had all these things. My task was to build a new function for the business internally and provide a lot more muscle to its offer. It was a big job and the combination of his support and pushing me out of my comfort zone was exactly what I needed to succeed.

"I really appreciated how he listened. As a senior leader, later in my career, I have discovered it is one of the hardest skills to master. It is not just about hearing what is happening around you, making decisions, solving problems, or delivering results. A great boss listens to what someone is asking for but – more than just that – they look beyond the words and deeper into the support needed.

"Often, when talking to a senior leader, you can struggle to find the right words, or you are more circumspect, which makes you less open. For instance, if you're not getting sufficient support from others around you but you don't want to name and shame anyone. So, the best bosses must read between the lines of what is being said.

"When a manager listens well, they understand you more fully – in the case of Anish, it meant he stretched me without pushing me too far. He could take an educated risk and push me into new areas and more challenging assignments. This tested my skills and meant that I grew as an individual in the workplace.

"It is too easy to limit yourself – deciding ahead of time what you can and can't do. A good leader judges when you are near the edge of your comfort zone and then how to push you past it.

"When you hear someone stumble, sound nervous, perhaps look to the sky for answers - that is when you can start to get the most from them.

"The last one – never giving the answer – was probably the most difficult one to understand. Good bosses don't tell you how they would do it, they don't suggest a solution, they coach instead. This might feel slower, more time consuming and harder work – both for the boss and the employee – but ultimately you create a stronger workforce.

"Take the example of a problem like how to find fewer, bigger, better ideas for new products. My boss could have told me to run a shorter brainstorming session, come up with fewer ideas, be more ruthless in voting or hire different consultants.

"But, having spoken to him and talked it through, then gone away and considered it, new ideas were formed – such as setting up a concept lab to co-create, or a moonshot internal or external prize. Too often leaders jump to supporting with answers when it is better to help define the problem more accurately.

"It hits you all at once, and when that happens, you realise the value of not being spoon-fed information and acting as a drone or assistant. I became more confident, more knowledgeable and a more independent employee as a result – able to develop skills much more quickly.

"In doing this, outstanding bosses ultimately make you feel great about yourself and often create a fantastically strong bond of professional respect. I have always been grateful for that."