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Self perception - do bosses know themselves better than their staff?

"Know yourself" is one of the most common themes promoted by management trainers when they go about trying to encourage people to grow, develop and change.

Most managers will have quite clear views on themselves in terms of their own strengths and limitations, and these views often form the basis of what is discussed at the manager's annual review. Typically managers will recognise what their positives and negatives are and will commit to some kind of development that builds on their perceived strengths and reduces their perceived limitations. That being said, it is always interesting to see just how accurate a manager's self-perceptions are, especially when it comes to dealing with their staff.

Our most recent research using the Good Boss Questionnaire has highlighted some findings which challenge the accuracy of a typical manager or boss's self perception. There are two main sets of findings which highlight potential shortcomings in a manager's self perceptions when tested against the views of his or her subordinates.

The first finding highlights the point that managers or bosses typically rate themselves higher on their behaviours than their staff do. For instance, of the 14 scales that make up the Good Boss Questionnaire, bosses rated themselves significantly higher on Strong Communicator, Listener, Open, Rewarding, Balance Focused, Team Orientated and Self Aware. With their own apparently exaggerated scores on these scales, bosses may potentially underestimate the negative impact that they have on their reports.

The second finding relates to the consistency with which bosses rate their own behaviour. Each scale on the Good Boss Questionnaire is made up of 4 "negative" behaviours and 4 "positive" behaviours. When bosses and their reports were asked to rate boss behaviour on these scales, it was quite apparent that reports were more consistent in their assessments of their bosses than bosses were of themselves. Using a statistic called Cronbach's alpha, it was seen that for all 14 scales, reports were more consistent in their assessment of their boss than bosses were of themselves. Bosses were least consistent in their self-perceptions on the scales of Empowering, Listener, Open, Balance Focused and Self Aware.

An alternative way of looking at the consistency of boss self-perception is to examine the degree of agreement reached between bosses and their reports. Of the 14 Good Boss scales making up the questionnaire, there was statistically significant agreement on 8 scales. However, when we looked at the agreement of two reports to the same boss, there was statistically significant agreement on all 14 scales. In every case the degree of agreement between raters to the same boss was higher than that achieved between a boss and one of their reports.

The implications of these results are quite clear. Although we can never prove that bosses know themselves better or less well than their reports do, the evidence leans very much in favour of the assessments made by reports. These assessments are typically less exaggerated and more consistent, and emphasise beyond doubt the potential of 360^o instruments like the Good Boss Questionnaire.

Tony Borkowski is an independent Chartered Occupational Psychologist, working on an on-going consultancy basis for the Good Boss Company.