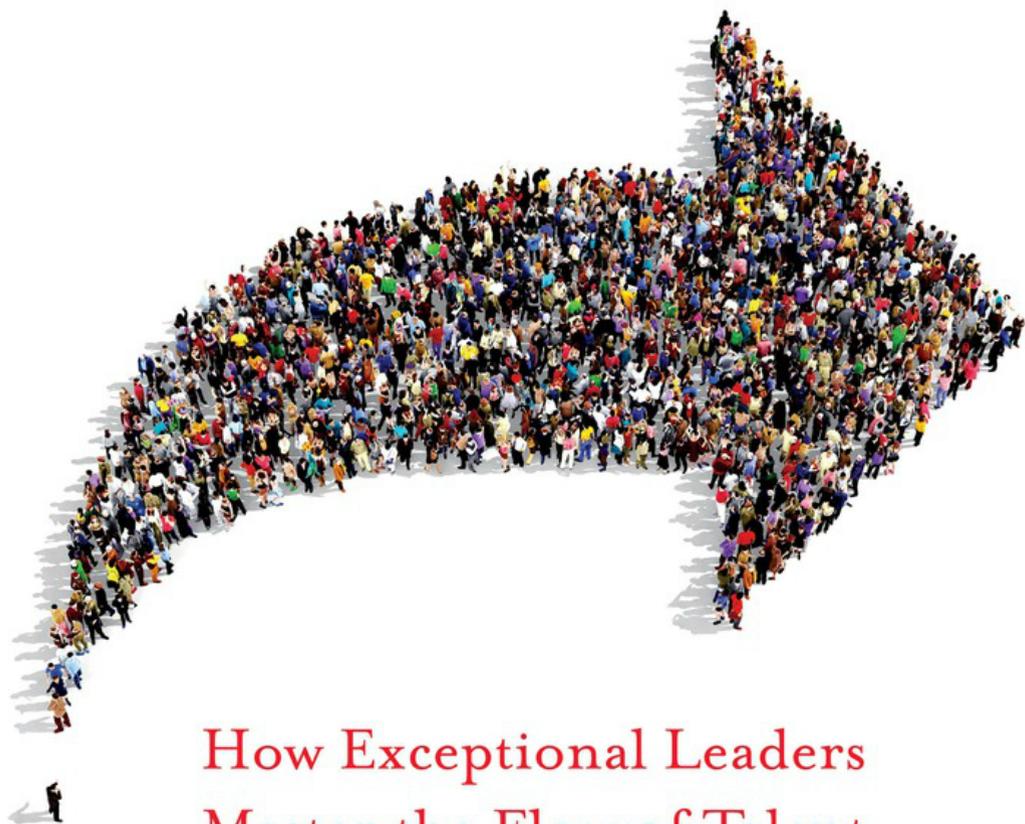


“*Superbosses* shows the incredible impact that great managers can have, both on their employees and on entire industries. Finkelstein has written a true leadership guide for the Networked Age.”

—Reid Hoffman, cofounder and chairman, LinkedIn; coauthor of *The Alliance*

SUPERBOSSSES



How Exceptional Leaders
Master the Flow of Talent

SYDNEY FINKELSTEIN

author of *WHY SMART EXECUTIVES FAIL*

CHAPTER FOUR

Uncompromisingly Open

If you're a movie buff of a certain age, you may remember the historic 1956 film *Forbidden Planet*. An early big-budget science-fiction production, *Forbidden Planet* was the first film that took place entirely away from planet Earth, the first to feature a robot as a humanlike character, the first to depict travel via starship, and the first to feature a musical score composed entirely of electronic instruments.¹

Audiences today would laugh at the movie's primitive production values. However, in 1956, one eight-year-old boy was so gripped by *Forbidden Planet* that he felt as if he really had been transported to an alien world: "I can remember being in the theater, wishing that it would be over so I could get back to Earth. At the end of the movie, when they finally do start the voyage home, I was greatly relieved, because I was kind of terrified to be on this planet the whole time."² The electronic soundtrack in particular blew him away, sounding like both special effects and music at the same time.

That boy was Ben Burtt, who in 1977 was offered a chance to work on another pathbreaking science-fiction film called *Star Wars*. A gradu-

ate of the University of Southern California's film production program, Burttt jumped at the opportunity; "I realized, here's a film I've sort of wanted to do all my life."³ Yet the film's creator, George Lucas, gave him a difficult assignment. In Lucas's vision of filmmaking, sound figured prominently; it had to be fresh and original, customized to the demands of the film. You couldn't just borrow sounds from a studio library and hope they would suffice. Up until this time, science-fiction movies had featured electronic sounds, like the ones in *Forbidden Planet*. By the 1970s, filmgoers had come to perceive those sounds as dated and corny. Lucas asked Burttt to take a new approach: rather than start with tones produced by synthesizers, could he collect recordings from the real world as raw material and then modify them in the studio?⁴

Burttt did exactly that. He recorded kitchen appliances, freeway traffic, wild bears, and the sound of breathing in scuba equipment.⁵ As he soon realized, different actions and characters in *Star Wars* posed different challenges. The greatest challenge of all was developing sounds for the charismatic robot R2D2: "R2D2 is a character and he beeps and moves and he doesn't speak English," Burttt told me. "But you have to understand what he is meaning. Yet the script said R2 didn't say anything; he just made electronic noises."⁶ Burttt had to figure out what those noises were, and he had to get George Lucas to say yes to his ideas.

As Burttt knew, Lucas had a general sense of what he wanted for the R2D2 character. The sounds had to be "organic," not too robotic, and they had to express a humanlike personality. Beyond that, Lucas didn't specify what he wanted for R2D2; Burttt would have to come to him with different possibilities and Lucas would see if they worked. Burttt began by experimenting with different types of sound, seeing which ones seemed promising and which didn't. When he came up with noises he thought might work as part of R2D2's "language," he invited Lucas to hear them. Lucas rejected many of Burttt's early sounds on the grounds that they weren't "organic" enough.⁷ Eventually it became clear that the

best noises were ones they initially vocalized themselves and then mixed with synthesized sound. “And you end up with two boys making sound effects together. Something like you would get thrown out of third grade if you did it.”⁸

In other ways, though, the imagination behind R2D2 was quite different from casual third-grade antics. As fun as Burt’s work ultimately was, there was never any question about who was in charge. Whether it was for R2D2 or any other part of *Star Wars*, George Lucas knew what he wanted and never hesitated to say no. Burt remembers that Lucas never spent much time explaining himself: “He would just tell you what he thought. He might not give you a lot of details, but he would say, ‘I don’t like this—is there something else?’ You got used to that.” At the same time—and this is a key point—unlike other top producers, Lucas expected his people to put forward well-crafted, “semi-complete” ideas of their own. “I just had the freedom and I could just put an idea together and present it to him. Then he could pick through it and take out what he doesn’t like, and be inspired and add his own ideas to it. . . . I had a chance to crystallize my own ideas about something and then see if they would work.”⁹

Apparently, they did. Burt’s pioneering work in modern sound design led to four Academy Awards, including two for the Indiana Jones films with George Lucas.¹⁰ He also created the voice for *E.T. the Extra Terrestrial* (allegedly pirating a recording of his wife sleeping in bed with a cold for the lead character)¹¹ and the leading man—robot—in Pixar’s *Wall-E*.¹²

In every industry I investigated, I found superboss protégés every bit as innovative and accomplished as Burt. These talented people were helping re-create how a restaurant chain can serve its customers, reinvent how universities invested their endowments, reimagine what a comic book could be, and, yes, revolutionize the science-fiction film. This was no surprise; as we’ve seen, superbosses make a point of seeking out the most unusual and creative talent available. But I wondered, once

superbosses had talent like Burt on board, how did they not only motivate them to perform but also unleash their potential for innovation to the fullest?

The answer lay in a wonderful paradox all superbosses possess—one illustrated by Lucas’s distinct way of working. On one hand, superbosses have a clear, uncompromising vision of what a project, a company, or even an entire industry could be, and they drive their people hard to help realize these dreams. At the same time, superbosses encourage their people to *rethink virtually everything else* about their jobs. In fact, they expect such rethinking and view it as a core job responsibility. Burt wasn’t asked to mindlessly follow Lucas’s vision in coming up with R2D2’s voice; he had wide latitude to generate his own, original solution, as long as he remained within the broader confines of Lucas’s vision. Superbosses want to be surprised and delighted by what their protégés do. They push people to seek out new opportunities and, if necessary, to change direction at a moment’s notice. It is this strange, seemingly impossible blend of unshakable vision and openness to change that allows superbosses to unleash a torrent of new ideas among their people, and in the process, drive their own extraordinary business success.

Protect the “Why” (and Only the “Why”)

How can superbosses move in such a seemingly contradictory way? In a few (exceedingly rare) workplaces, you may find laissez-faire bosses who are open to anything their employees may care to try. In most workplaces, though, you’ll find the exact opposite: bosses who are not at all amenable to new ideas. They may talk about innovation and the necessity of adaptation, but they really only want employees to do their jobs the way they were told to do them—with clear rules, instructions, boundaries, goals, and no excuses. At best, most bosses implicitly rele-

gate innovation to second place behind the imperative to just get the work done. Rather than weaving innovation into the fabric of daily work, they contain and limit it by setting up special task forces, committees, and project teams devoted to adaptation and change. They “carve out” time for innovation rather than living and breathing it every minute. It is particularly difficult to find bosses who are uncompromising in what they do *and* open to almost constant change.

Superbosses are able to operate in this way because, as we’ve seen, they themselves are innovators to the core. Their visions aren’t recipes for inertia or minor amplifications of the status quo. They break with industry norms, in some cases so fundamentally that they wind up defining entirely new industries. When superbosses hire employees, they implicitly invite them to buy into their vision and become part of the revolution. But they also invite them to buy into the mind-set of openness and innovation that made their vision possible in the first place. Superbosses expect everyone else to be visionaries like they are. For them, innovation and uncompromising vision aren’t necessarily incompatible choices. On the contrary, they’re inextricably linked.

The combination of clarity of vision and constant innovation enables superboss-run businesses to sustain innovation over extended periods. Employees cannot innovate in meaningful ways unless they have a frame within which to work—and the superboss’s fundamental vision provides precisely that grounding. Consequently, employees are liberated to move around and innovate the specific mechanisms, processes, methods, and policies they use in their own positions. Superbosses are astoundingly successful because they willingly and eagerly change anything and everything, so long as it doesn’t contradict or dilute their inherently innovative vision.

In many companies, you see a sharp divide between senior managers who focus on “strategy,” and mid- or low-level managers who are supposed to focus on “execution.” The strategists (the thinkers) are expected

to be inventive, while the much larger mass of executors (the doers) are supposed to follow orders. Superbosses will have none of this. Everyone at every level is expected to think, whether they're crafting a three-year corporate plan or coordinating logistics for next week's sales operations. To a talent spawner, even the smallest executorial tasks can be opportunities for doing something a little bit better, or even a *lot* better. Everybody in the organization experiences the fulfillment and responsibility of moving the company toward a more profitable, vibrant future. And as we'll see in chapter 6, superbosses likewise will not hesitate at times to get their hands dirty and immerse themselves in the details of daily work. They keep their vision current and vital by bringing it in touch with on-the-job realities.

Alice Waters's restaurant Chez Panisse perfectly illustrates the superboss's merging of strategy with execution. When Alice Waters opened Chez Panisse in 1971, she was determined to replicate the respect for fresh, local food that had so impressed her during a stay in France. Having grown up on a typical American diet, she was transformed by what she had experienced—her eyes were opened by farmers' markets where growers could describe the provenance of every last lettuce, leek, and aubergine; where chefs from small neighborhood bistros arrived early to snap up the best peas and cauliflower that would adorn their dishes that night; and where housewives lined up to buy the entrecôte from Limousin, the fish from Brittany, and the Cantal from Auvergne that they would serve for dinner, perhaps with a nice glass of Sancerre or Burgundy. Waters also wanted to spread the distinctly French habit of making time to sit with others and enjoy a good meal. This clear vision led her to do many things that were unheard of in restaurants at the time. Whereas most restaurant owners purchased from wholesalers, Waters and her staff did the painstaking work of seeking out the best small farmers and purchasing directly from them. Rather than adopt a fixed menu, she created a new menu each day to reflect the local ingredients

she was able to procure at their peak of freshness. “Although it would seem to be one of the most natural ways to cook and plan menus,” her protégée Seen Lippert told me, “it was (and still is) unknown to many people.”¹³

An ordinary chef will create a menu with an eye toward the cost of raw ingredients, but not Waters. “If she wanted a certain ingredient—truffles, say—she declined to notice the price,” one observer has written. “Shaver in hand, she would stroll through the dining room snowing truffles left and right, no charge, ‘just to see the delight on their faces.’”¹⁴ In an interview, Waters confessed that she always thought of herself as unrelenting in her standards, at the expense of business concerns. “I always think of myself as uncompromising. . . . I guess really better to say idealistic . . . but I just am completely focused on the quality of the food.”¹⁵

You would think a boss like Waters who took food *so* seriously would leave little room for employees to innovate, but that was not the case. Star Chez Panisse pastry chef Lindsey Shere observed that Waters “always listened to a lot of people, and she brought a lot of people in who gave her ideas . . . but she was the person who was able to synthesize it all and turn it into something that everyone could understand and appreciate.”¹⁶ Joanne Weir referred to her as “the conceptualist of the restaurant.”¹⁷ Waters operated in a way similar to how George Lucas worked with Ben Burtt; she would leave her team more or less on their own but would pop in to inspect and adjust their work, collaborating on solutions as necessary. Seen Lippert related that Waters was not someone who liked to boss people around: “What she does very well is . . . she can ‘edit.’ She would always be walking through the kitchen just when you were struggling. Sure enough, she’d look down at the worktable and zero in on exactly what was troubling or just ‘off.’ She would describe how she wants it to feel or something a bit more esoteric. But it pushed you in the right direction”¹⁸

Lippert further related that in meetings, Waters was never the only

one talking; she almost always solicited employees' opinions and wasn't upset when they ran contrary to hers. As a result, ideas were free to develop quickly. Waters herself stresses openness, flexibility, and collaboration as central to her philosophy. People who didn't want to collaborate with her or others "shouldn't be working at Chez Panisse" she told me. "I think of myself as needing and wanting that kind of collaboration and that we're trying to make something really greater than the sum of its parts."¹⁹ In Waters's mind, her restaurant contained all the complex teamwork (and beauty) of a symphony orchestra. "You have to have great musicians, and you have to inspire them, but they are the ones that make that music."²⁰

For managers running organizations of any size, the superboss's practice of being uncompromisingly open casts light on the classic problem of how far or intensely to pursue innovation. Most bosses understand the need to innovate, but they fear that too much innovation will bring an organization too far from its roots and main competencies. What should you change and what should you keep the same? Where do you draw the line? Superbosses suggest a very clear solution to this problem: protect the "why" of your business, but be prepared to constantly improve everything about the "how" of your business as if your life depended on it. Because, as superbosses will tell you, it does.

Nothing Is Sacred

Innovation is in the DNA of superbosses. But when you look closer at what these master innovators actually do, a clear pattern emerges from which every leader, every manager, and every employee can learn. There are three distinct kinds of action superbosses take to nurture openness and innovation in their people. First, superbosses encourage constant risk taking and rule breaking. Kyle Craig, former chairman and CEO of

Steak and Ale, remembered that his superboss Norman Brinker “would challenge you. He would say: ‘What do you think you could do there? What is working? Go try something. . . .’ It was very empowering because it gave you a license to say, ‘We *can* do some things differently!’”²¹

Even more powerful than their words are the examples superbosses set. The superbosses I studied are celebrated among their protégés for their willingness to overturn established practices and challenge their own assumptions. Bill Walsh’s West Coast offense, for instance, arose as a midseason response to a losing streak. In 1970, Walsh was working as an assistant coach for the Cincinnati Bengals under Paul Brown. The Bengals’ offense had been struggling without star quarterback Greg Cook, whose career had abruptly ended the previous season due to injury. In Walsh’s estimation, Cook was “probably the greatest prospect the game had ever seen”²²—a bigger, taller version of Hall of Famers Joe Montana and Steve Young combined. Walsh’s offense with Cook was a deep passing game, which set an NFL record that still stands today for yards per completion for a rookie.²³ However, without Cook’s talents, the vertical passing game Walsh favored was ineffective, and the Bengals had lost six straight games before turning to backup quarterback Virgil Carter.

While Carter was not blessed with Cook’s arm, he possessed mobility, accuracy, and intelligence—three traits that would come to define the typical Walsh (and West Coast) quarterback. To take advantage of these traits, Walsh replaced his vertical offense with a timing-based horizontal offense, which focused on making accurate throws within ten yards of the line of scrimmage. Most of all, the offense was designed to highlight Carter’s strengths and hide his weaknesses.²⁴

Walsh’s new offense not only changed football history, it changed the Bengals’ fortune midseason. Cincinnati went on to win seven games in a row and capture the team’s first division title. However, despite the success, the offense was nowhere near as dangerous as it needed to be in

order to dominate, forcing Walsh to further refine his scheme. Walsh recalled that Brown came in one day asking for more “swish and sway”—meaning more motion in the offense, more creativity. Walsh explained, “Despite having some talented players, at the time our offense ranked somewhere in the middle of the league and wasn’t scaring many teams. So I put more man-in-motion plays in our playbook.”²⁵ It was this efficient passing game (often run with man-in-motion offense) that would bring Walsh acclaim as a head coach, first at Stanford and later in the NFL. With swish and sway, the other teams *were* scared—and Walsh’s teams became virtually unbeatable.

In some cases, intuitive, spur-of-the-moment adjustments wind up defining the look and feel of superbosses’ businesses. Norman Brinker’s first restaurant venture, a Dallas coffee shop called Brink’s, sought to offer high quality at a low cost, but the average check size was too low to make the business profitable. During the summer of 1965, a few years after opening Brink’s, Brinker and his business partners put together a plan for what was then a new kind of restaurant: a casual dining establishment somewhere between fast food and fine dining. Because check sizes were usually higher at dinnertime, this new restaurant would be in a position to outperform Brink’s.²⁶ As part of this concept, Brinker inadvertently came up with two features that would soon take root across the country. The first was the now much-lampooned phrase: “Hi, my name is . . . and I’ll be your waiter tonight,” an idea that sprang from Brinker’s view that a casual restaurant should offer a friendly atmosphere. The second was the salad bar, which until then was only featured in low-end cafeterias.

Brinker initially intended this restaurant to be a Mediterranean-style eatery. But one night after construction had already begun, he happened to see the 1963 British adventure-comedy *Tom Jones*. In one of the movie’s funniest and most famous scenes,²⁷ Tom Jones sits down with Mrs. Waters (no, we’re not talking about Alice Waters here) in an eighteenth-

century English tavern as the two wordlessly consume a voluptuous dinner, expressing sexual desire through the biting of fowl off the bone, the slurping of oysters, and the indulgent munching of juicy pears. Brinker awoke the next morning buzzing with an epiphany: He would scrap the Mediterranean idea and transform the restaurant into an Old English concept.²⁸ Steak and Ale, as the restaurant would be called, would have the kind of bold and funny atmosphere Brinker had loved in the movie—complete with a young and attractive waitstaff that could pull off the frilly bodices and knee breeches of the costumes he had in mind.

To find this staff, Brinker improvised, turning to a source of talent that had barely been tapped by the restaurant industry: college students. It seems obvious in retrospect—college students would be friendly, not too expensive, and the epitome of “casual.” Brinker drove to the campus of Southern Methodist University looking to hire. Brinker knocked on the door of a fraternity house to announce he was hiring students—for tips only, but they could set their own work hours to accommodate their class schedules. Brinker: “The next day, forty or fifty students showed up for interviews. It was wonderful.”²⁹

Steak and Ale launched in 1966, and was a rousing success. The chain expanded rapidly and went public in 1971. In 1976, when Steak and Ale was acquired by the Pillsbury Company, it boasted more than a hundred locations. Brinker’s constant risk taking and rule breaking would continue later as he led Brinker International, a multibillion-dollar company with chains like Romano’s Macaroni Grill, On the Border Mexican Grill & Cantina, Maggiano’s Little Italy, Corner Bakery Cafe, Big Bowl Asian Kitchen, and Rockfish Seafood Grill. As his protégés remember, Brinker drove success by constantly adapting to shifting consumer trends. “Norman would always say to you that the trick is to be riding the wave.” Former Steak and Ale COO and Burger King CEO Lou Neeb explains, “Not in front of the wave to be crushed or in back of it, where you get left behind. The thing you always be-

lieved with Norman was that he understood the way the industry was and where it was going.”³⁰

Brinker was also known to say, “Nothing is sacred, other than that the guest returns.”³¹ Of course, one thing *was* sacred: his vision, the casual restaurant concept itself. But within that context, agility and reasonable risk reigned. As one protégé recalled, you were expected to take risks and “as a matter of fact, you got yourself into more trouble with Norman if you weren’t doing anything differently.”³² For most superbosses, risk taking alone isn’t enough: employees are expected to take risks *proactively*. Have you ever heard an executive say that he wishes his team would just take initiative when someone has an idea? “Why are they always asking for permission?” he wonders. Often, people know just what the answer is to that question: they’re better off checking in first because the executive probably isn’t as open-minded as he thinks. Superbosses blow right through this dance. Adelaide Horton, a protégée of Jay Chiat and former chief operating officer at Chiat/Day, remembers that at the agency “doers were rewarded and anything was possible. If you came to Jay with an idea for how things could be done better, he would say, ‘Go ahead and do it.’”³³

Safe Spaces

The second way superbosses nurture openness is by removing anxieties that get in the way of people doing new things. If you analyze why individuals in your workplace just don’t seem to come up with anything new, I bet you’ll find that fear of failure plays an outsize role. This isn’t such an irrational fear, either; in many companies, failure is a dirty word. Mess up and you get labeled as unreliable, incompetent, or worse. Superbosses, of course, don’t think about failure the way most people do. Rather, they are masters at reframing failure as an opportunity in dis-

guise. By implication, they don't *fear* failure but instead view it as just a step you sometimes end up taking on the way to success.

Scott Ross, a digital media executive who worked with both George Lucas and Miles Davis, told me, "These guys had no fear. Maybe in the middle of the night, they'd be afraid, but when I would see them they acted like they were twenty years old. They were constantly prepared to walk into battle and get shot at."³⁴ Kyle Craig, who worked with Norman Brinker at Burger King in the 1980s, remembered the superboss openly acknowledging his failure with Brink's coffee shop. "He was never unwilling to admit his failures and mistakes, which puts people around him very much at ease."³⁵

Superbosses also blast away at fear by creating work environments where creativity and innovation can thrive. According to Steve Alburty, Jay Chiat's ad shop was "the most unique work experience of our lives because there was such a sense of creativity and personal freedom."³⁶ Legendary film producer Roger Corman was known for letting his actors do their own thing when they were in front of the camera. Recalling Corman's logic, one actor mused, "I don't recall him ever telling me how a line should be read or telling actors I was working with what our motivation was."³⁷ Without a boss breathing down their necks at every turn, employees felt as if they had implicit permission to take chances and express themselves in their work. Their superboss *trusted* them—and that's precisely why he hired them. Compare that to many offices today, where employees send emails to colleagues at all hours of the day and night because they "don't feel confident to make a decision on their own."³⁸

Another way superbosses help protégés overcome any reluctance to innovate is by creating new opportunities for them to contribute. Hedgefund impresario Julian Robertson would sit in the middle of his company's large workroom and loudly debate ideas his analysts presented. Not every analyst who volunteered an idea got a pat on the back; when

Robertson thought an idea was dumb, he would say so. Sometimes he grew angry and confrontational, but not unproductively so. “People didn’t take it personally, because they saw everyone going through the process. . . . [He would say things like:] ‘You say this company has got some great product, and I just called so-and-so and he said the product is just terrible.’”³⁹ Employees understood that unfettered debate was simply Robertson’s style, that he deeply appreciated new ideas, and that they didn’t need to fear pushback from him. Robertson’s office became what so many offices today aren’t: a safe space for fresh thinking and experimentation.

The Show Must Change

A third way superbosses nurture openness and innovation is by encouraging their employees or associates to never, ever rest on their laurels. “To be and stay a great musician,” Miles Davis used to teach, “you’ve got to always be open to what’s new, what’s happening at the moment. You have to be able to absorb it if you’re going to continue to grow and communicate your music.”⁴⁰ Time and again I found that superbosses were consummate cool hunters—always on the prowl for the next great product idea, the next great trend, the next great person to hire. Speaking of *Saturday Night Live*, comedian and *SNL* alum Conan O’Brien once said: “You always get the sense that the show is almost like a shark that’s constantly on a mission to find what’s new, what’s hot, what are people into now? And chomp its teeth into it.”⁴¹ Lorne Michaels affirmed this observation in an interview, noting that constant change and a future-oriented outlook were perpetual features of running the show: “The show must change. I know it’s supposed to be ‘must go on,’ but ‘must change’ is important also.”⁴²

The image of a shark always on the hunt is apt for every superboss I

studied. They all had an inexhaustible drive to improve, in part a reflection of competitive pressures. As Waters told me, she perceives the constant need to change as “just kind of a compulsion, an obsession, and I don’t know where it comes from. It’s just pushing me.”⁴³ David Murphy, who worked for Jay Chiat from 1975 to 1980, noted, “Jay’s middle name was innovation. He had a singular vision that it was totally acceptable to risk; playing it safe was just not acceptable.”⁴⁴

If superbosses fear anything, it isn’t that they’ll go off the deep end with their innovations, but that they’ll *stop* innovating and get old and complacent. As confidant Sal Cesarani remarked of Ralph Lauren, “I will tell you that Ralph doesn’t ever want to be the older guy. . . . Cary Grant was great but when Cary Grant got older, what kind of parts do we put Cary Grant in? Do we put him in as a grandfather? It’s not going to work. . . . Ralph is not going to do film but what Ralph could do next, no one knows. He will think of the next thing.”⁴⁵

Take any superboss, and you’ll find that he is responsible for numerous innovations that belie a restless curiosity and passion for novelty and growth. The renowned television producer Roone Arledge revolutionized sports broadcasting during the first few years of his career by introducing experiments like instant replay, field-level sound (traditionally, sports broadcasts didn’t include the down-and-dirty sounds of the game), game-time interviews, slow motion, graphics showing statistics, cameras mounted in race cars, and more. A closer look at the development of instant replay offers a glimpse of the shark mentality at work. As Arledge described in an interview with *Playboy* magazine, he and ABC engineer Bob Trachinger went to have a few beers one day, and Arledge took the opportunity to ask Trachinger “if it would be possible to replay something in slow motion so you could tell if a guy was safe or stepped out of bounds.”⁴⁶ Trachinger jotted down on napkins how slow motion might work. “We talked and sketched and drank beer that whole afternoon and when we were finished, we had the plans for the first instant-replay de-

vice.”⁴⁷ For a superboss, having a few beers with a colleague isn’t just a nice social encounter—it’s a chance to map out the next industry-shaping innovation.

A superboss’s cool hunting can take any number of forms. Norman Brinker was so good at anticipating emerging restaurant industry trends because he was constantly probing the minds of consumers. Not content to peruse the usual market research reports, Brinker would spend hours in his restaurants, talking to customers and staff, developing a reputation in the industry for his approachability and willingness to learn.⁴⁸ He often posed as a confused tourist outside his restaurants and asked departing customers about their dining experience. He also did competitive research by pretending to be a manager in competitors’ restaurants, asking customers what they thought of the food and service.⁴⁹ Even into his twilight years, when he was riddled with health issues, Brinker continued to ask unsuspecting guests what they *really* thought of their dining experience, all so that he could stay one step ahead. “You’ve really got to stay tuned in,” he once said, “because the customer is changing all the time.”⁵⁰

I had a chance to see such sharklike behavior with my own eyes when J. Crew CEO Mickey Drexler came to speak to MBA students at Dartmouth College’s Tuck School of Business. Some executives content themselves with politely answering questions, but Drexler used the occasion to run an informal focus group. He actively worked the room, squeezing any piece of potentially usable insight out of students (who, after all, were in J. Crew’s target demographic). “How do you like your Ludlow jacket?” he inquired of a student wearing J. Crew merchandise. “Where did you buy it? Do you find it matches well with our chinos? How many of your friends have Ludlows?” Then he turned to the entire group. “Okay, class, how many of the guys here have Ludlow coats? Come on, how many?” This continued throughout the day Drexler spent with us. When students weren’t sure how to answer a question, he handed them his business card and asked them to email him with an

answer. Every minute was a chance to learn something new that would help him push his business forward.

As you might expect, leaders like Drexler are so concerned with what's next that they have little nostalgia for what already exists. Eivind Aadland, chief conductor and artistic leader of the Trondheim Symphony Orchestra, told me that his superboss, Jorma Panula, was "very, very free from tradition and from history. If he finds a simple, good solution to a problem, he will not be interested in what the traditional way of doing it is."⁵¹ In Aadland's view, it was this attitude, sustained over time, that enabled Panula to teach his students that the conductor's role must change from "the dictator of the old days" to "a fellow musician with the orchestra."⁵² This refusal to bind oneself to the past applies just as strongly to the superboss's own accomplishments. When one of Roger Corman's assistants happened upon a historic review of one of his films, Corman read it and then promptly found a suitable place for it—the trash.⁵³ As film director Joe Dante put it, "I don't think Corman thinks backward at all. I think he thinks forward."⁵⁴

Superbosses' nonstop cool hunting doesn't just inspire protégés to become more open-minded; it infuses them with sizzling energy that they find exhausting, exhilarating, and impossible to resist. Of his time working with Brinker, former Burger King chairman and CEO Lou Neeb reflects, "It is hard to put in words the feeling and emotion and intensity that you sense . . . but when you are there at the time, it just makes absolute sense."⁵⁵ Sid Ganis, a Lucasfilm alum, told me that the environment there "buzzed from the day I started until the day I left six and a half years later. It never stopped buzzing. It was great every single, solitary day."⁵⁶

Employees of superbosses get swept up in a whirlwind of constant innovation, and in many cases their internalization of the superboss's omnipresent drive to grow leads them to ultimately leave the superboss and pursue their own visions. For what they teach—most powerfully by

doing—is less a perspective on business than a perspective on life. They teach protégés to take what exists and bravely go not one, not two, but many steps beyond. And they teach them to do this obsessively. They energize people around them to inject creativity into their work each and every day. The result is not merely great wealth and influence for the superboss; it’s a lifetime of career success for those lucky enough to become his protégés.

Fostering Creativity like a Superboss

Superbosses begin by hiring unusual talent, people who are often more intellectually gifted than their peers and also simply *different*. They unleash this talent by inspiring them with a vision, fueling their motivation, pushing them to the limit while giving them the confidence to excel. But if that weren’t enough, superbosses go one crucial step further. They tell their people, “Okay, now you’re expected to rethink everything. Go change the world!” And guess what? Their people *do* change the world.

What superbosses have to offer us, then, is nothing less than a formula for creating dynamic organizations—companies that never stop changing, that adapt constantly to new circumstances, that plunge headlong into the future. Managers and business academics alike have long pondered how leaders can help create such organizations. In his seminal book *Leading Change*, Harvard Business School’s John Kotter argued that leaders who seek to change their organizations need to create a sense of urgency among their people. Change is hard, so you need to create what Kotter called a “burning platform” on which to build change initiatives. The implication of this entire model is that change can happen only when an organization is in a really bad place—when a market or an industry has already evolved and a company is so woefully out of touch that immediate change has become necessary.⁵⁷

Kotter's model has much to recommend it. But superbosses, with their practice of remaining uncompromisingly open, present us with an alternative that opens an entirely new way of thinking about change. The organizations superbosses create are so continually adaptive and inventive that they are in effect "built to change" (a phrase adapted from business researcher Jim Collins's bestselling book *Built to Last*). Superbosses never get to the crisis point envisioned by Kotter because they are constantly growing and evolving in an organic way. They *lead* the change in their industry, leaving it to executives in other companies to follow and feel a sense of crisis when they lag too far behind. Isn't such a proactive stance better? Why would a person want to wait until he is on his deathbed before starting to eat right and exercise?

Kotter's model goes on to argue that once leaders convince others of the need to change, they should mobilize a coalition of allies in the organization to bring that change about. In the case of a superboss organization, this step (and others Kotter suggests) isn't necessary. The superboss's very way of being has assured that such a "coalition of the willing" is already firmly in place. The superboss has hired people attuned to change, has inspired them to change, and has given them confidence to change at every turn.

Few leaders have mastered how to make change happen consistently over an extended period. Superbosses, operating in plain sight, have figured it out. Ultimately, a superboss doesn't construct his organization around a specific framework or formula, as Collins's book and many others suggest. Instead, superbosses embrace a mind-set of change, within the framework of their unyielding vision. That mind-set leads in turn to the welcoming of creative people into the company, to shared experiences that reinforce openness, to an ingrained culture of openness, and ultimately to a track record of sustained innovation and growth.

If you're a boss and you're clear about your nonnegotiable vision, then why not commit yourself to declaring open season on changing all

that *is* negotiable? Sit down with your team and have everyone write down three major assumptions behind a strategy, initiative, or project you're currently working on. Don't be surprised if you and your team members write down different assumptions. What you're really signaling is that it's okay to examine, compare, and challenge how you go about doing what it is you do. You and your colleagues will find there may well be multiple ways of approaching a problem that are equally valid. The implicit message here is that no singular rationale for *how* something is done is sacred. And anything can be changed if something better comes along.

So many organizations have “elephants in the room,” or specific practices or rules that never change because nobody has the courage to question them. With time, more and more of these “undiscussables”⁵⁸ emerge, restricting the flow of ideas and impeding a healthy process of questioning. To “open up” the organization to change, explicitly invite conversation around the undiscussables, rewarding employees for raising tough issues. You could also perform an audit of your own communications and attitudes. Do you secretly regard some practices as sacred and unchangeable? Which ones? You can't expect your reports to suggest ideas for reforming or improving established practices if you're sending messages that discourage such efforts. Finally, you could assess whether your KPIs (key performance indicators) support innovation around execution. If they don't, then it's time to change how you evaluate what employees do.

Don't fear what is new. Open yourself up, secure in the knowledge that you're also staying true to what you really value. Of course, it's much easier to open up yourself and to encourage employees to open up when you've already built trust via an intimate working relationship with them. Superbosses I studied developed exactly such relationships, invested as they were in constantly teaching young employees personally and by example. Learning retreats and training modules are great, but superbosses

intuitively know that whether you're teaching creativity or anything else, experiential, on-the-job learning at the foot of a master works best. One of the most successful and cutting-edge ways of imparting anything might also be one of the oldest models for organizing a workplace: the ancient bond between masters and apprentices.

Reprinted from SUPERBOSSSES: How Exceptional Leaders
Master the Flow of Talent by Sydney Finkelstein
Now on sale from Portfolio / Penguin Random House
For more, visit www.superbosses.com