

Leadership Vs. Bosses: A Leader's Hard-Earned Lessons

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Published Feb 12, 2026, 09:00am EST



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As Executive Director of The SOL Foundation, a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit focused on education and environmental sustainability, I've learned a tough truth: Being a leader isn't about being a boss. When I stepped into leadership with my MBA

background, I assumed "bossing" was the way to go. Wrong. It turns out you can be a boss or a leader, but trying to be both will sink you (and your organization).

The Boss Mentality

A boss focuses on tasks, processes and control. They tell people what to do and how to do it, often prioritizing outcomes over people. This approach can create dependency and compliance, but it rarely inspires innovation or ownership, especially if an organization thrives on innovation. For example, a boss might dictate project timelines and metrics without considering team input, leading to burnout and disengagement.

Research has [shown](#) that this top-down approach can lead to high turnover rates, decreased morale and a lack of creativity. In fact, a 2024 study by Gallup found that [only 21% of employees](#) are engaged at work, and a significant contributor to this disengagement is poor leadership.

The Leader Mindset

On the other hand, a leader focuses on people, vision and empowerment. They inspire and motivate others to achieve goals, prioritizing growth, collaboration and impact. Leaders foster ownership and innovation, driving outcomes through people. For instance, a leader might collaborate with their team to set ambitious goals, providing resources and support to help them succeed.

This approach has been shown to have a significant impact on organizational success. Another study [found](#) that leaders who prioritize people and empowerment are more likely to have high-performing teams, increased innovation and improved employee retention.

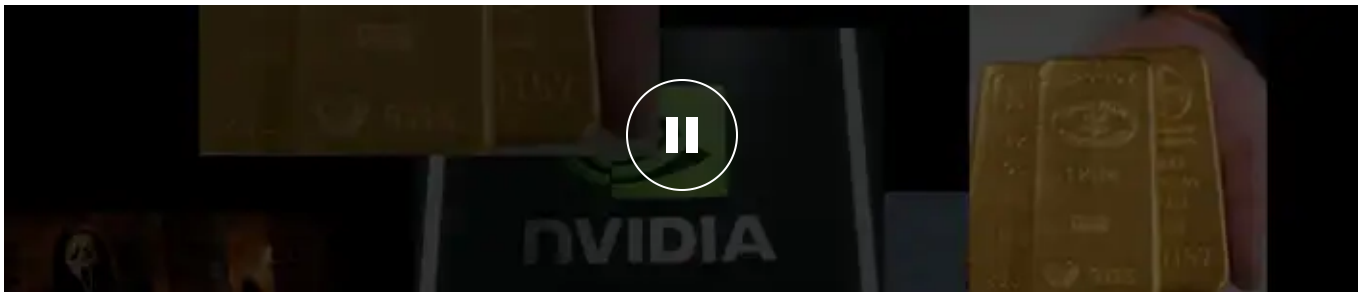
Key Differences

The key difference? A boss drives tasks; a leader drives people (and outcomes through people). Leaders understand that their role is not to control, but to enable. They recognize that their team members are experts in their own right and that collective wisdom is more powerful than individual knowledge.

Why Leadership Matters

So, why focus on being a leader versus a boss? Because leadership creates sustainable impact. By empowering your team, you can unlock creativity, resilience and scalability. In the nonprofit sector, where resources are limited, leadership is often what sets organizations apart. It's the difference between merely existing and truly making a difference.

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I've seen the impact that effective leadership can have. When I first took on the role of Executive Director, I was focused on proving myself and showing the world that I was capable. But I quickly realized that this approach was not only unsustainable but also ineffective.

My Journey

It took time, reflection and a willingness to learn from mistakes to realize that leadership is not about me; it's about the people I serve. I've had the privilege of working with incredible teams, partners and stakeholders who have taught me the value of collaboration, empathy and trust.

In this series, I'll share what led me to this realization, data-backed insights on leadership vs. being a boss and guidance for leaders navigating this shift.

Leadership Is A Mindset

Leadership isn't a title; it's a mindset. By prioritizing people and empowerment, we can drive lasting change. Being a boss isn't leading the team; it's making sure the projects are completed within the timeframe and the value it provides. As leaders, it's our responsibility to create an environment where our teams can thrive, innovate and make a meaningful impact.

Our foundation's mission is to support, promote and aid in education, with a focus on environmental sustainability. As leaders, we have the power to create a ripple effect, inspiring others to join us in driving positive change.

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