

# My Take on Bob Sutton's "12 Things Good Bosses Believe"

Robert Sutton is one of my favorite thinkers. Anyone who would write a book entitled *The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't* is okay with me. Bob is Professor of Management Science and Engineering at Stanford University and he writes honestly about management on his blog "Work Matters." Here are his *12 Things Good Bosses Believe* and my comments.



Image via Wikipedia

**1. I have a flawed and incomplete understanding of what it feels like to work for me (Robert Sutton discusses #1 in more detail here.)**

Yep. Give an anonymous satisfaction survey to your employees if you think you know what they are thinking. As managers, we create our own little world based on what we think employees need and want and what we are doing in response to our perceptions of them. It's a beautiful world we create. It can be a rude wake-up call when we find we don't really understand what our employees think about us, our decisions or our management style.

**2. My success and that of my people depends largely on being the master of obvious and mundane things, not on magical, obscure, or breakthrough ideas or methods.**

My mentor taught me "Take care of people's paychecks and their vacation time – get it perfectly right or fix it quickly, and you'll be fine." Anyone who has ever done payroll or staff

scheduling can tell you that these “mundane” tasks are two of the most complex and frustrating, yet critical jobs in management.

**3. Having ambitious and well-defined goals is important, but it is useless to think about them much. My job is to focus on the small wins that enable my people to make a little progress every day.**

Your staff want to know that the group is moving forward, but ultimately they don't relate the big projects to their day-to-day job. What they want (just as you and I do) is to have the small irritations, the glitches, and the bugs to be fixed. They want to be able to stop wasting their time doing workarounds because the manager won't take the time to fix something.

**4. One of the most important, and most difficult, parts of my job is to strike the delicate balance between being too assertive and not assertive enough.**

One of my Mary Pat-isms is to say that the only time I tell people exactly what to do without getting their input is when the building is on fire. This is a bit of an exaggeration, but I do think employees get tired of me asking “What do you think?” when all they want is for me to tell them what to do. If I tell them what to do though, how do I know that their input might not produce a better answer? I also want them to think about solving the problem themselves or getting input from others.

**5. My job is to serve as a human shield, to protect my people from external intrusions, distractions, and idiocy of every stripe ”” and to avoid imposing my own idiocy on them as well.**

I interpret this as my effort to make it safe in the organization to make mistakes and to be human. The tricky part is walking the line between making it so safe that people feel that mistakes don't matter, and making it safe enough to stand

the pressure of healthcare every single day. I tell the staff that my job is to free them to do their job.

**6. I strive to be confident enough to convince people that I am in charge, but humble enough to realize that I am often going to be wrong.**

An employee once told me that she really likes a boss who says "I don't know the answer, so let's see if we can find the answer together."

**7. I aim to fight as if I am right, and listen as if I am wrong "" and to teach my people to do the same thing.**

I would amend #7 to say that I tend to rely on my experience to guide my decisions, but I often want to hear what others' thoughts are to make sure the best solution is achieved.

**8. One of the best tests of my leadership and my organization is "what happens after people make a mistake?"**

See #5.

**9. Innovation is crucial to every team and organization. So my job is to encourage my people to generate and test all kinds of new ideas. But it is also my job to help them kill off all the bad ideas we generate, and most of the good ideas, too.**

Innovation is crucial in delivering healthcare. One of my favorite techniques is to see how problems are solved in other fields and try to apply them to healthcare. Teaching others to seek inspiration and to be comfortable with test-driving solutions is critical to giving a practice the competitive edge.

**10. Bad is stronger than good. It is more important to eliminate the negative than to accentuate the positive.**

I agree. I hate it, but it's true.

**11. How I do things is as important as what I do.**

Or maybe more important. How I speak to staff, how I speak to patients, how I demonstrate compassion, how I deal with frustration, how I relate to someone who is going through something tragic, how I talk about my boss, how I \_\_\_\_\_  
(fill in your answer here.)

**12. Because I wield power over others, I am at great risk of acting like an insensitive jerk and not realizing it.**

Being a manager carries with it an almost bone-crushing responsibility for doing the right thing for the organization AND the right thing for the employee. Trying to achieve a win/win in as many situations as possible is a noble calling, but one that can wear you down to a nub, which is when most of us may be accused of acting like insensitive jerks. Acknowledging this state (apologizing is good) and taking a time out is the right thing to do.

If you describe what you want in a boss, and you're not describing you...think about it.