



While the boss is away...

By Tom Geoghegan
BBC News Magazine

Gordon Brown is on his hols in Southwold, and his deputy Harriet Harman is one of three senior figures to take charge of the country in his absence.

It's a scenario repeated across the UK as the summer holidays begin in earnest. The boss books some time off to recharge, while their deputy steps up for the duration of the holiday.

But how to be a good stand-in boss?

BOSES DON'T NEED TO BE BOSSY

It's tricky to make the step up into the boss's chair and it requires some delicacy, says corporate psychologist Ben Williams.

"Some colleagues are good chums. Start acting up and the relationship will change.

"Someone previously a peer is technically now a subordinate. It's important that the deputy acting up doesn't get delusions of grandeur."

So instead of issuing orders, use phrases like "Would you mind looking at..." he suggests. And a briefing on the deputy's authority before the boss departs minimises back-stabbing.

Leading people who were your peers can mean ambitions and jealousies are there bubbling under, says business psychologist Alan Redman.

"That can be difficult. The relationship has to change somewhat and quite quickly but then you have to rejoin the team afterwards, so you have to limit any damage to the relationship.

"You hear about people becoming Hitler-type figures but that makes it difficult to rejoin the team when the boss returns."

MAKE DECISIONS

Chris Brady, a professor of management studies at Bournemouth University's business school, says: "The guiding principle is do the job as if it's your job for the rest of your life.

"Do the right thing and don't be thinking 'It's only for a week so I won't do this and I won't make a decision about that'."

That means the outgoing boss must give his authority to the incumbent and back any decisions made in his absence.

The stand-in boss must be responsible for decisions, says Mr Williams.

"You don't want him or her to be a highly-paid answering machine. It's wasteful and creates the wrong impression, whether it's a government ministry or a local authority."

BE FLEXIBLE IN APPROACH

Think about what style is appropriate, says Mr Redman, bearing in mind what the boss and the team would expect.

"If he's a controlling boss with a 'top-down' style, but your style is democratic, then think about shifting your style downwards towards your boss's direction.

"Don't impose your own style because it's only a brief window to demonstrate your credibility as a leader, so you need to consider flexing your own style to meet your team halfway and meet the needs of your own boss."

Barack Obama is a model in how to act as a leader-in-waiting, says body language expert Judi James.

"You want that kind of look where people say you look right in that job. Obama [in Berlin] looked humble but confident. He was a little self-effacing but looked the part."

DON'T ROCK THE BOAT

Don't obviously try and make a splash, says Ms James, because people hate to see people desperate for power. And now is not the time to settle old scores with people who have annoyed you.

Identify the boss's flaws and try to be a welcome contrast, she says.

"It's a good idea to subtly add what your boss doesn't have. You can afford to look like the relaxed alpha because your boss was probably looking like the stressed alpha before the holiday. But never look like you are trying desperately to wedge yourself into the job."

It's well known that Gordon Brown is not a good smiler, so Harriet Harman could benefit because she can smile naturally.

SPRAY YOUR TERRITORY

Just because you're taking over the boss's office doesn't mean you should put your feet on the desk or bounce around on the chair, says Ms James.

"If you're taking over the boss's office, make your own mark. It's called spraying the territory. Like putting a small vase on the desk or your own family photograph.

"Don't do everything, like repainting the office in your signature colour. One small gesture will do.

"It's so other people will see it and it gives you a feeling that you're there in your own right rather than keeping the seat warm."

Add your comments on this story, using the form below.

For the ultimate guide to how not to do it, you couldn't do better than Tom Sharpe's novel *Indecent Exposure*, where Piemburg town police chief Kommandant Van Heerden goes on holiday, leaving Lieutenant Verkramp in charge. Chaos ensues as Verkramp gives an outing to his delusions and lays waste to large sections of the town.

Nigel Macarthur, London, England

I've done this twice, both times to cover long-term absence. On both occasions, the team said they didn't want the real boss back. My guiding light both times was to think about how I'd prefer to be led, start by doing it that way but encourage feedback about what the team needed in way of leadership to perform effectively. When I say that one occasion was in the Army and the other leading a team of teachers, I think my methods have fairly general application.

Megan, Cheshire, UK

It is important not to do it too much better than it is normally done. You may know that your boss is not bothered from day to day and spends A LOT of time on Facebook, but he won't want you showing the world how easy it is to do his job well.

Erik, Stevenage, England

Never step on anybody while on the way up, you never know they may end up your line manager. What a thought. If you're a people person and treat people the ways you liked to be treated, then there isn't usually a problem due to mutual respect.

Trevor Carruthers, Burton on Trent

What qualifies you to give this advice?

Lee, Manchester

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