



PROFILES IN LEADERSHIP, COLLABORATION, AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT INTERVIEW SERIES

INTERVIEW WITH SYDNEY FINKELSTEIN



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I'm Steve Kraske, and this is the Overland Resource Group podcast series – “Profiles in Leadership, Collaboration and Employee Engagement.” These are stories about the surprising results organizations achieve... by experimenting with alternative approaches to working collaboratively, empowering employees and leading more creatively.

These stories are told by leaders of corporations, government agencies and the unions which represent their workforces as well as leading experts in the field of organizational change.

The series is underwritten by Overland Resource Group, a change leadership consultancy bringing transformative results to organizations for over 30 years.

Today we're visiting with Sydney Finkelstein, author of *Superbosses: How Exceptional Leaders Master the Flow of Talent*.

Sydney Finkelstein is the Steven Roth Professor of Management at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College...and director of Tuck's Center for Leadership. He has published eight previous books, including the Wall Street Journal bestseller *Why Smart Executives Fail*.

Sydney Finkelstein, welcome.

SYDNEY FINKELSTEIN STEVE KRASKE

Thank you. Great to be on.

Sydney, what is a superboss?

SYDNEY FINKELSTEIN

A superboss is a leader that actually helps other people accomplish more than they ever thought possible, and as a result, they accelerate the careers of those people, giving them incredible opportunities.

STEVE KRASKE

These tend to be extraordinarily passionate people. Tell me about that.

**SYDNEY
FINKELSTEIN**

Yeah, there's no question about that. People like Ralph Lauren, who redefined American fashion, Lorne Michaels from "Saturday Night Live," obviously the king of comedy in the modern era, Julian Robertson in hedge funds who just really changed the nature of the hedge fund business. These are people that are innovators. These are people that care a lot about what they're doing, and as a result of all their efforts to be successful themselves, they end up really helping other people do great things and open the doors for those people.

STEVE KRASKE

You know, something else struck me about them: They don't get upset when good people under them decide that it's time to leave. In fact, they sometimes encourage rising underlings to take off. Why?

**SYDNEY
FINKELSTEIN**

Yeah, this is uh—that's probably the most unusual, unexpected thing that I found. To be fair, I won't say that every single superboss was equally kind of cool about this. Somebody like Larry Ellison from Oracle didn't always like the idea of somebody leaving, especially if they came after—if they decided to compete against them. But for the most part, they had an understanding, which is: You can't hold great people down. You know, when you talk to senior executives and they say, "Why would I want to let my top talent go?" what they don't understand is—listen to the verb they would use: "let their people go," as if you have that ability to do that. People do what they want to do, and as soon as you realize that—and it is the reality—you might as well try to become very strategic about this, try to benefit, try to manage that network. And by the way, when you gain a reputation of helping other people do great things, some great people keep finding you. You become a talent magnet. So it actually turns out to be a win, even though it might sound like a scary proposition.

STEVE KRASKE

There's another question you attempted to answer with this book, which is why some unusually successful people turn out to be superbosses, and many others do not. Martha Stewart is not a superboss. Neither is Jimmy Johnson, the legendary former coach of the Dallas Cowboys. Why not? What holds them back when they are otherwise such incredibly successful people?

**SYDNEY
FINKELSTEIN**

Well, you know, to be a superboss really means that you are advancing other people's careers. And why don't some people do that? You know, not everybody cares. Not everybody makes that effort. I'm not saying, by the way, that being a superboss is the only path to great success. It happens to be probably the best one, and it's such a common-sense thing. If you can attract great talent, you can help them get better. You can develop them. Of course you're going to get better yourself, because of that talent around you. But not everybody thinks that way, and that's the way it is. It's just not in their own DNA or their make-up.

STEVE KRASKE

One other pattern you found, Sydney, is that superbosses tend to be highly unconventional. How so?

**SYDNEY
FINKELSTEIN**

Yeah. Very much so. Lots of counter-intuitive things they do, from, for example, how they think about attracting and identifying talent. They'll offer a job to someone that they think is great, whether or not there's a job description, and you know, the folks in HR shudder when they hear something like that. They are looking—they're constantly looking for untapped talent pools.

You know you have people like Bill Walsh from the San Francisco 49ers, former head coach, who ended up being primarily responsible for the rise of African-American head coaches in the NFL, because he saw an untapped talent pool and helped develop an entire generation of talent. So these are things that are not necessarily standard, and I'll give you one other example. While they have very strong vision—you know, you mention the word passion before. There's no question about that. And you're not going to be successful working for a superboss if you don't get it, if you're not part of what they want to accomplish but at the same time, they're actually unleashing creativity. They want to hear the best ideas you have. They expect you to keep coming up with new ways of doing things, and if you have a new idea they haven't thought of, they're a hundred percent for that.

In fact, they expect you to do that. So, this is an interesting combination of being really uncompromising in how you think about your vision, your purpose in life, at the same time as you're completely open to the creative and innovative ideas of people on your team.

STEVE KRASKE

You know, speaking of unconventional, they sometimes even lavish responsibility on inexperienced people underneath them. Why would they do that?

**SYDNEY
FINKELSTEIN**

Well, they see potentials better than some others because they're open-minded to it. They don't assume that just because you've gone through a variety of different steps in your career that you're automatically the best person for the job, and the reason is because the world is constantly changing. And there's one thing that superbosses really, really are great at—they're change agents, and so they're believers in creating opportunity for people, and they're not beholden to more traditional ways of thinking. They're willing to take a chance, and if they don't get it right, they make an adjustment, and they move on. And that's different from a lot of leaders that find it so difficult to adjust and adapt, given that they've gone down a particular path.

STEVE KRASKE

You know, you have an interesting phrase in this book to describe one of the chief characteristics of superbosses—and that is, they live in the workplace experience with their employees. What do you mean they "live in the workplace experience" with their employees?

**SYDNEY
FINKELSTEIN**

Yeah, it's another one of these unusual things that they do. And the best way to describe it is that what superbosses have done is they've resurrected the

apprenticeship model of how to develop talent, and if you think about that, for hundreds of years, that was the primary method that people used to develop anyone. You'd learn as an apprentice at the foot of the master.

Well, where's all that gone? Gone out the door, except that superbosses have brought it back, and that means not just delegating big and providing big opportunities to people, but also rolling up your sleeves and working hand-in-hand with people. Not every day, of course, but occasionally being a teacher. So they're in the work. They're so totally immersed with the work and so they do something that a lot of people, you know, typically will say, "Well, how do you do that?" And it's actually not that hard. It just requires a mindset shift. Delegate big. Create the opportunity while rolling up your sleeves and working with people. Be a teacher for those people, and they're going to get a lot better a lot faster, just like an apprentice would, working with a master.

STEVE KRASKE

And again, staying with this idea of unconventionality, superbosses aren't interested in best practices, you write, because that can close the door to new ways of doing things. Again, explain that one to us.

SYDNEY FINKELSTEIN

Yeah, I think that our fixation on best practice is such a big mistake, because what is best practice? It means that you've gone around looking at other companies, or other parts of your own company, and you've documented what seems to work well. Well, the verb tense in all that is the past tense, and with the pace of change, the digital revolution, global competition, other technological changes, I don't see why you'd want to be spending your time focusing on best practices all day long, when in fact, the world is constantly changing.

I'd rather be open—and this is a superboss mentality to be sure— I'd rather be open to new ideas, new ways of thinking. And look, you don't want to re-invent the wheel every time. It's not that they totally ignore what works, but they're not willing to accept—they don't like the idea of just accepting that we've figured it all out, and there's nothing more to learn. There's no way to get better. They're actually quite the opposite. They're always looking. They're opportunity hunters, and they keeping seeking out opportunities to learn new things, and to be creative, really, to be innovative in their businesses.

STEVE KRASKE

You know, you've written in all your years of working on leadership and consulting, that at the end of the day, strategy is great, but it's people that matter most. Superbosses get that, and that makes me wonder: Why are people so often overlooked when it comes to the equation of running great companies?

SYDNEY FINKELSTEIN

It is remarkable, really, when you think about that. And again, not everyone, and for superbosses, they certainly put people first, but let's take the big picture on this, Think about how enterprise, how organizations have changed over the last, say 10 years. It's been an absolute revolution, a digital revolution. You see production and service ops different, marketing and sales different,

supply chain management. What's the one part of an organization that's changed the least? Turns out to be the most important part — the people part, the leadership part. That's the place where we've seen the least innovation. And I've heard from CEOs that I talked to five years ago, and 10 years ago and I talk to today, you know "What are you worried about? What are your pain points? What are you concerned about?" And the primary thing that keeps coming up is people, talent development.

And so we don't have nearly enough innovation when it comes to the people side, and maybe that's why we're taking people for granted. But superbosses — and this is really one of the most powerful lessons, I think, of all — is that superbosses have created an innovation machine when it comes to managing people and being a more effective boss and being a strong leader. And given the fact that we haven't moved the needle in all these years by doing things according to "best practice" or conventional practice, maybe it is time to be thinking about the superboss playbook and some of the unusual ways they think about people.

STEVE KRASKE

And this is the \$10,000 question or the million-dollar question: Can a leader learn to be a superboss, even a leader who doesn't begin his or her career as a superboss? Or is that a skill set that was in your hip pocket even at birth?

SYDNEY FINKELSTEIN

Yeah, interesting. I mean it's a great question. The truth is I've come to the conclusion, after spending years talking to people, interviewing people, studying this, working with companies on these types of topics. My conclusion is that virtually anyone can become a superboss, and that is really important. While I talked about in the book about the Ralph Laurens of the world and a lot of famous people — but there are superbosses today, up and down in organizations.

And I know this because I've been doing book signings and speeches. You know, people want to tell me stories about their superboss, and they're talking about a middle manager of course I've never heard of, in a company I barely knew. There are not nearly enough superbosses, but they exist, and they're there. So why can't somebody else be a superboss? Everything in the book, everything in the playbook, as I call it, is learnable, is teachable, and if you want to institute this into a whole organization, it is certainly a more challenging task, but frankly, that's what I'm spending a lot of my own research on, a lot of my own consulting work on right now, with assessment work and diagnostic work. The answer is yes, anyone can do it, and any organization can become more superboss-like.

STEVE KRASKE

If anyone listening to this wants to take those steps to become a superboss, the single most important thing they have to do, Sydney, is what?



**SYDNEY
FINKELSTEIN**

Boy, I think it boils down to a willingness to change the way in which you work on a day-to-day basis. It requires a mindset shift. I don't think there's anything in the superboss playbook that's really rocket science. There's a lot of unconventional things, as we've talked about, counterintuitive things. But anyone can do it. The thing that holds people back is they're afraid to be innovative. They're afraid to actually take a chance. They're afraid to do something different, and if that's the case, it's never going to happen for you. So, that's the first step. I can't do that step for somebody. They gotta do it themselves. But if somebody listening is ready to do that, then we're ready to help as well.

STEVE KRASKE

Sydney Finkelstein is the author of *Superbosses: How Exceptional Leaders Master the Flow of Talent*. Thank you very much for your time, Sydney.

**SYDNEY
FINKELSTEIN
STEVE KRASKE**

Great talking to you, Steve.

This Profile in Leadership, Collaboration and Employee Engagement Interview was brought to you by Overland Resource Group. For a transcript or more information, visit their website at www.orginc.com or email them at WorkingTogether@orginc.com.