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I'm Gonna Need Ya to Come In on Saturday:

The Management Principles of Bill Lumbergh

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I prefer to approach assignments with a broader workplace view, but my everyday experience as a downtrodden teacher inevitably directs my responses. When reading *12: The Elements of Great Managing*, just one glance at “The Second Element: Materials and Equipment” (15) was enough to raise my blood pressure—which of the businesses to which schools are inevitably compared expects employees to provide not only the materials necessary for innovative new ventures, but even their own basic office supplies, such as...staplers? Perhaps red staplers? When someone tells me to have fun following a reference, and one of the references is to Mike Judge’s 1999 film, *Office Space*, quotes from which are a sine qua non for communication in my family, I cannot resist. I must follow the trail of discarded TPS cover sheets through the maze of cubicles until I locate the Minotaur: Bill Lumbergh--the archetypal modern Bad Boss, and force him to reveal his management secrets.

Following this footnote did not provide much of a research challenge. I entered the URL from the footnotes for Chapter 2 in *12* and reached the Amazon *Office Space* link for purchase of the “*Special Edition with Flair*”. My well-watched VHS copy has no extra flair; a trip to Best Buy to purchase a long overdue DVD version was definitely justified. Before departing for the store I enjoyed perusing the fan remarks on the Amazon page. One posting expressed, “In a way, this movie has made my life easier to live. I suspected my job was absurd before seeing this film. Now I know it is. But somehow knowing the truth makes it easier to get through the day”. Another, less cheerful cubicle dweller had written, “Real Reasons Work Sucks: Let’s face it. Unless you’re in management, work is the most boring thing about your day. Especially office work.” Clearly, there is more in the reactions to this film than simply comic relief. I watched the film again, applying the principles discussed in *12* to discover how the boss character helps

create “a corporate culture that is the enemy of kindness, individuality, and any other human value” (La Salle D-3).

Though Lumbergh is a comic creation, he has real roots in the years Judge spent in a Silicon Valley office campus. It is very easy to see his management shortcomings—just list the chapter headings for *I2* and note his lack of each quality. Beyond the crucial importance of using TPS cover sheets, no one at Initech knows what will help them keep their jobs; the equipment provided to Lumbergh's workers is so inadequate that in one scene they beat a fax machine to death with baseball bats; he praises no one, encourages no one, and seems not to notice that employees actually speak in response to his demands. It's hard to choose just one Bad Boss trait from such an embarrassment of riches, but it is in his complete lack of *The Fifth Element*, “Someone at Work Cares About Me as a Person” (63) that Lumbergh reaches the mythic level.

The casual mannerisms employed by Lumbergh as he interacts with employees all communicate a fundamental disrespect. When he visits cubicles, drinking coffee as he goes, his behind actually perches on the workers' desk space. Invading their puny territory, he makes himself at home. As he makes requests of them, he stretches, scratches, and yawns. This is the relaxed behavior demonstrated by a mammal with nothing to fear from the weaker creatures who surround him. The lack of tension displayed in these actions is not meant to communicate relaxed collegiality, but disdain. I have actually been in a meeting with a school district curriculum officer who had been asked to attend to discuss some controversial issues. This official luxuriantly stretched and gave himself a scalp massage as he answered heart-felt questions in a languid drawl, at once angering me by communicating his lack of respect for our concerns, and entertaining me by reminding me so irresistibly of the great Bill Lumbergh. Like

the two fans on Amazon, I was cheered to realize that my local nemesis was a recognized species of American Boss, already skewered in *Office Space*.

References

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