



## Leading With Heart

*In his novel, The Boss, Andrew O’Keeffe demonstrates just how much influence executives can have*

By Kate Pavao, June 2009

Andrew O’Keeffe has worked in senior HR positions at companies including IBM and Hewitt Associates. So, he’s seen his share of bosses, and heard some horror stories from employees along the way. Here he tells Profit readers what a bad boss looks like, why leadership matters in a trouble economy – and how to pass “The Gossip Test.”

**Profit Online:** Where did the idea for this book come from?

**AO:** The inspiration came over coffee in a café when a friend of mine told me a story about his boss. It took him months to get to see his boss, and when he finally did sit down with him alone, he only got about five slides in. Then his boss flicked through the rest of the presentation and said, “Carry on, I’ll be back.” And he left. My friend was amazed, shattered, frustrated, and bemused by what had happened.

I came away from that coffee shop mulling thinking that I needed to do something with what I have learned during my career in human resources with a range of companies, and from studying bosses, and also for me trying to be a decent boss.

**Profit Online:** Why did you decide to write the book in fiction?

**AO:** Because the topic is emotional. The novel format allowed me to cover the emotion attached to the topic in a way that would have been difficult to do in non-fiction. But everything in the book is true, even much of the dialogue. Everything that happens to Lauren, the book’s protagonist, happened to somebody I know or someone who shared a tale with me, including the story I heard at the coffee shop.

If you ask people about their boss, which I did, you find that people are instantly express an emotion, either good or bad. People are not neutral on the topic. When I told people I was writing a novel based on true stories about bosses, people would immediately share their story. Someone told me she once had a boss who threw a shoe at her, hitting her on the cheek with the heel. Another

person gave me the story at the book's climax, in which one of Lauren's bosses steals and presents her idea at a conference.

**Profit Online:** Has writing this book changed your own ideas about being a boss?

**AO:** Yes, it's been a very important personal journey. It certainly helped me reflect on leadership, and crystallize my most important recommendations for others. The subject of bosses is very emotional and as executives, we can be conscious in how we set the emotional tone. The second point of reflection is about the importance of gossip (see sidebar), that people will share information and opinions because we're social animals. Third, how executives use power – or not – impacts the organization. The fourth area of reflection is the top leaders set the culture of the organization. Staff then monitors and picks up the tone of behavior that's expected and modeled. The people who then associate with that style are those who progress because they're strongly attached to the most powerful individuals.

**Profit Online:** Do today's economic challenges make your book more important?

**AO:** The book is fundamentally about power, the way in which we use our relative power as executives. And in the current economic climate, power can swing towards the bosses, whereas the last decade it's been much more a talent war. But even in the current economic cycle, it's important that executives try to use power appropriately, because people will remember how you used your power at this time.

Also, staff members generally have less choice to leave their organization right now. So bosses need to make the office environment a positive one in which people can work. The bosses in the book are based on a leadership framework called the Human Synergistics model, which says we lead based on a tendency towards one characteristic: either we're constructive, passive, or aggressive. Executives should think about the consequences of their style and to use power appropriately.