

# Why Dogs Wag Their Tails

Lessons Leaders Can Learn About Work, Joy, and Life

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**Sample chapter**

## CHAPTER 5

### Choose Your Boss

If you have ever owned a dog, ask yourself this question: Did you choose your dog, or did your dog choose you? I've asked several people. After some reflection, they all concluded that the dog had a good bit of say in the choosing.

The whole idea of dogs choosing their owners got me thinking about the importance of people choosing their bosses. After all, you're going to spend a lot of time with your boss. That person will lead you and guide you through the day-to-day activity of your work. That person holds power and influence over you. It would certainly be to your advantage if, to ensure a good fit, you had some input into choosing your own boss.

So many clients have told me over the years how their relationships with their bosses could make or break their jobs, impact their satisfaction, and shape their ultimate success. A healthy relationship with your boss can mean happiness at work.

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Is it really possible to make an informed choice about your job? About the company you want to work for and the people with whom you want to work? After all, you will probably get only a cursory introduction to the key people in your prospective organization during the interview process. Also, when you're trying to get hired, you will undoubtedly focus on things like the specifics of the job, your employer's expectations, and your benefits and compensation packages, not to mention just trying to make a good first impression. And when it's all over, it may be hard to remember much of what was said, and who said it. This doesn't leave you much time or space for choice.

Furthermore, you'll look at other career moves within the organization once you've been working for a company for a while. Most of these will probably be based as much on availability—what just happens to come along when you're looking—as on the jobs themselves and how well they fit you and your aspirations.

That's all fine. But you also need to think about the importance of choosing your boss. There are some bosses you'll get along with better than others. Some bosses have qualities that will help you meet your goals better than others. And some bosses will teach you more than others. What too many people often discover after they've accepted a position is that it's just as important, if not more so, to find the right boss as it is to find the right job.

In this chapter, you'll read about two dogs who had a good bit to do with choosing their owners and the magical relationships they formed. Then you'll hear from three people who chose their bosses, and the positive

work experiences they had. My goal is to help you realize you have important choices you can make about the people for whom you work, if you're conscious and thoughtful and believe that you can.

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### Kayla's Choice

My friend BJ had always loved dogs and wanted to have one from the time she was a child. This love continued after her marriage, but her husband was allergic to dogs, so she didn't push for one. Eventually BJ divorced, and she felt it was time to fulfill her childhood dream and get the dog she had always wanted.

BJ's first dog was the last of a litter of ten. There was only one dog left by the time she found the breeder. Here's how BJ describes meeting Kayla, a twelve-week-old Labrador:

"The breeder said she had only one dog left in the litter. She said the dog was terrific, but for some reason, wouldn't go to two other folks who had come to see her. For that reason, the breeder wouldn't let them have Kayla.

"But when Kayla saw me, it was like magic. She just ran to me. I honestly believe she waited for me because we were each other's guardian angels, and the universe conspired and decided we needed to come together at that moment. Corny, I know, but I swear Kayla knew I needed her as much as she needed me."

That was a defining moment for BJ in many different ways. She had always been a passionate person, but her divorce had catalyzed her to pursue her dreams. On that day, BJ rediscovered her gift. She has since transformed her love of dogs into an important avocation. Now she has abandoned dogs right in her home, sheltering dogs that might have been put to sleep if not for BJ and other volunteers like her who take them in. She rehabilitates the dogs and readies them for adoption. She has rehabilitated seven dogs over the last five years.

Every dog that BJ has taken care of has been adopted—a remarkable record—and BJ keeps in touch with all of their adoptive families. Kayla is head of the pack, of course, and helps keep the other dogs in line. Kayla's nephew Cody also helps, as does Spirit, a Husky who has joined BJ's family.

BJ will pop up again later in the book, but I wanted to introduce her briefly here to set up Milo's story.

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### Milo's Choice

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Milo was one of the dogs BJ took in. He escaped one night through the fence in BJ's yard. Milo trotted down the street and appeared several blocks away at the glass door of my friends Alice and Steve. One house to

the left or to the right, and Milo's life would have taken a different course. Steve and Alice didn't know BJ at the time, but Milo was about to change all of that.

Inquisitive, wandering, probably a bit frightened, Milo stared at Steve through the glass door until Steve finally noticed him. Milo had big brown eyes and an innocent look. Steve opened the door and welcomed Milo in.

Here is how Steve described it:

"Alice, my wife, was unhappy about letting a dog in the house. She was crystal clear about not wanting to add a dog into our mix of four cats. But she was willing to let Milo stay so we could keep him safe until we found his owner. If you ever get lost, you want Alice to help you. She's great in a crisis—very resourceful and level-headed.

"We have an enclosed mudroom on the other side of that glass door. Letting the dog into the mudroom seemed innocent enough to both of us. He was safe, but neither one of us embraced him right away. We made two phone calls—one to the number on his tag and the other to Animal Control. As we planned, Animal Control picked up Milo so he would be sheltered until his owner reclaimed him.

"There were some early signs that fate was taking control. The first sign was that the dog didn't bark. We liked that. He sat sweetly alone in the mudroom while we sorted things out. Accelerating the erosion of our resolve, he seemed to like being with us. With his tail wagging, Milo left with Animal Control to continue his adventure.

"That was when the story began getting complicated. The Animal Service League called us and asked us to take Milo back 'for a short time.' They told us Milo lived just down the street in BJ's shelter, but BJ couldn't come out to get Milo, and would we mind dog-sitting just for a little while.

"I didn't even know BJ at the time. We've since become great friends. We have Milo to thank for that. Anyway, I said yes, and this time, when Alice wasn't paying attention, I let Milo out of the mudroom and into the house. When I finally got around to walking Milo back to BJ's shelter just a few houses away, something magical happened. I had already gotten attached to Milo, and as we walked together down the street, I realized I wanted to make Milo a part of our home.

"It was instantaneous. It just hit me. I knew that Milo had picked me out of a lineup, and it was meant to be. I knew I'd have to really sell Alice on it, but I just couldn't let Milo go."

"It has been five years since that walk down the street. Milo has changed our lives in positive ways. He's made my wife a dog person. He brought BJ into our lives, and she has become an extended member of our family. He makes us laugh and has re-taught us how to play and have fun. We are so grateful Milo chose to come to our house that night, and that we allowed ourselves to be chosen."

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Is It Time to Change Your Boss?

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Regardless of whether you believe that Kayla and Milo were savvy enough to pick their owners, you'll probably agree that it would be nice if, from time to time, you could be as intuitive as your favorite dog. The intuition that we often see in animals is a survival skill that many of us humans have either lost or never fully developed. But intuition often presents itself to us in the form of inspiration. Patrick's story is a great example of this.

Patrick had been working for his boss, Jill, for almost two years. Jordan, the manager of the department, had brought in Jill to boost the department's credibility and performance. Patrick participated in the interview process for recruiting his new boss. Unfortunately, Jill wasn't his first choice, and ultimately, it was Jordan's decision to make.

Things weren't great between Patrick and Jill right from the start. Patrick had been close to Jill's predecessor, a well-respected company leader. Patrick held Jill to a standard that, in all likelihood, was probably too high for anyone. And Patrick, although he wouldn't admit it, had always been a bit resistant to change. He came from a hard-working, blue-collar family. His father had been a bricklayer and a member of the union for more than thirty years before he retired. His mother had raised four boys on her own while her husband was out working. Patrick can remember that from the time he was a little boy, everyone in the family had a job to do each day like clockwork. Whether it was taking out the garbage, cutting the lawn, cleaning the bathroom, or changing all the bed sheets, you either did it or gave up your portion of mashed potatoes or your treasured scoop of chocolate pudding.

It didn't help that Jill was younger, somewhat privileged, and had graduated from what Patrick called "a college with a reputation." She wasn't a great team-builder and didn't give much in the way of encouraging feedback, which was bothersome for a man who had grown up in a tight-knit, supportive family. In fact, Patrick only heard from Jill when there was a problem, which in Patrick's case, was turning out to be true more and more frequently.

Patrick was a strong performer who had always received glowing reviews and raises. He was growing increasingly frustrated with Jill, with his own job, and with the company. In spite of his efforts, he was dreading going to meetings with Jill. His one-on-one meetings with her, which happened infrequently, often turned into sessions on what he was doing wrong or could be doing better. For the first time in a twenty-year career, Patrick was thinking about leaving the company.

Patrick and I had worked together on his leadership skills for several years. He had received a promotion and had successfully changed leadership roles twice. His career had been on an upward trajectory until Jill arrived. Now it looked as if things might derail.

Patrick was spending an increasing amount of time grumbling about Jill at our sessions. At first, he tried different strategies in working with her, and this was productive. But none of them seemed to stick, and Patrick was growing disheartened.

Then, one day, Patrick came in with an interesting idea. A new position had opened up in a different division. The man running the division, Don, had a great reputation as a leader. What if Patrick tried to get a transfer to work for him?

"What a great idea," I said.

"There's one catch," Patrick said. "I'd have to take a step down in position to work for him. The job openings in his division aren't at my level."

"Interesting situation. Let's lay out a plan for what you're seeking, and the pros and cons of staying or going. Then you can make up your mind."

Patrick determined that he was looking for five characteristics in a boss:

1. Someone he could trust and someone who trusted him.
2. Someone he respected and someone who respected him.
3. Someone who gave him clear and measurable goals.
4. Someone who believed in developing a strong team mentality.
5. Someone who believed in helping him grow, was a good coach, and invested in his development.

Then Patrick wrote down the following information, with all the details filled in:

1. His personal goals.
2. His career goals.
3. His top talents.
4. Skills he needed to improve.
5. Jill's business goals and objectives.
6. Jill's leadership strengths and weaknesses.

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If he were to pursue the new position, Patrick felt it was important to interview with Don in a new way. He would have to be able to determine whether Don was the kind of person for whom he wanted to work while Don was trying to figure out if Patrick was the kind of person he wanted on his team.

Patrick and I worked together to create a series of questions he would ask Don. We built a plan for talking to other people in Don's division about what it was like to work for him. Patrick also went to a friend in the Human Resources department for her input and guidance.

Patrick talked it over with his wife to see whether they could make a lifestyle change to offset a pay decrease. On the upside, he also promised to negotiate somewhat more manageable working hours and less travel time away from home. His wife supported his plans.

George Eliot once said, "The strongest principle of growth lies in human choice." I'm constantly aware of this whenever I work with people who face difficult choices. But if you do all the difficult prep work, as Patrick did, you lower your level of risk along with the fear of the unexpected.

Patrick got the chance he wanted and decided to take the leap. He went into his new situation with his eyes open. He felt good about his plan, and there were no surprises. Patrick made the right decision (much as Milo had when he picked Alice and Steve). Don turned out to be the kind of boss Patrick wanted. And now that he's getting home at a more reasonable hour, he and his wife and family are happier with his job, too.

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### Colin Goes to Washington

(In His Own Words)

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I had a track record of choosing positions because something about each of them evoked passion in me. Working in broadcast television for five years gave me opportunities to meet exciting, famous people. The work was deadline-driven, fast-paced, and satisfied my need to be creative.

For the next ten years, I channeled my passion for helping people into working for nonprofit and local- and state-government organizations focused on stopping the spread of HIV and serving people affected by the virus.

After several years of interesting and satisfying work at one job, there were major executive-level staff changes. All of a sudden, I found myself in an administrative position. I went from a Raging Bull to a Minnie Mouse in seconds flat. I lacked the authority to make meaningful decisions, and I was assigned mundane projects. So, after repeated unsuccessful attempts to improve my situation, I began looking for something new, something exciting and dynamic.

Thirty-eight years old and looking for another position, I struggled to come to terms with reality. I knew I might never again feel the passion or compassion that led me to work in TV journalism or to serve people with HIV.

I've worked for lots of people throughout my various careers. Some bosses were good and some were lousy. Well, maybe that's not fair. Maybe "uninspiring" would be a better word. Either way, I believed my prospects were slim for finding something that excited me, but then I found someone who did: a passionate, articulate, elected official who was a staunch protector of consumers' and civil rights, and—a rarity among Washington's political elite—an effective legislator.

Her intelligence, commitment to public service, successful track record of taking on tough issues, and experience in overcoming personal tragedy inspired me. *She* inspired me. Working for any legislator, my friends warned me, would be very unpredictable, intense, and stressful. I imagined what it would be like to work for her before I took the job, to learn from her, and gain firsthand public policy-making experience.

Some of her current and former employees said that she could be challenging to work for, but that she treated her staff better than most other elected officials did. She expected her staff to work hard, but rarely phoned them outside of regular working hours. She was not unrealistic in her demands.

While a bit afraid of working in the political arena, I was open to it. It seemed to combine the deadline-driven intensity of television with the potential for really making an impact on the lives of people as I had done in HIV services.

How would I do in such an environment? Could I live on less salary? What did I need to feel personally satisfied and professionally challenged?

I searched inside myself and found my answers. She personified what I believed I needed in a leader. She was someone whom I respected, and she respected her staff. I was excited enough about the opportunity that I was even willing to take a significant salary cut to join her team.

More than a year has passed since I accepted the position. I've learned a lot in that time. Like any boss, she has her liabilities. But believe me, her liabilities are far outweighed by her strengths. She's smarter than most people I've come across. She's a great policy-maker and a perceptive politician.

Would I decide to work for her again? You bet! I feel as if I've been paid to learn about a whole new world. I've seen firsthand what it takes to pass a bill through our country's political machinery. I've learned to hone my abilities to influence people. I've gotten visibility with legislators. But my best lesson has been that nothing beats working for someone whom you respect and who treats you with respect.

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Terry Picks His Dream Boss

(In His Own Words)

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Most people leave their jobs because they can't stand their bosses. I'm no exception. But up until about ten years ago, I let my bosses pick me. It never occurred to me that I had the option of picking them.

I built my corporate career by looking at potential jobs for the sake of a carefully thought-out career strategy. I defined each step in terms of long-term goals. I spent a lot of time getting ready to impress potential employers, and I worked hard to nail down the "perfect interview."

I never took the risk of being genuine. I didn't pay attention to the things that might provide a true picture of me to my potential boss. And I never took the time to really think about what it might be like to work for that person. The result was a mixed bag.

Some of the people who hired me were running businesses that were very successful from an outside perspective. But once I got inside, it became all too clear that the business and the boss were a mess. I also ran into truly inspired leaders, fun and flawed and capable of great things. And their business success reflected that.

As my responsibilities grew, my bosses grew increasingly demanding. Those demands were not a problem, but another issue kept cropping up. Some of my employers did not make it a priority to connect with me as the work took its toll, and their demands were based only on the needs of business and not my needs and limitations as a human being.

In one memorable episode, I spoke up to a boss while we worked together one Saturday morning. I pointed out that as our business grew, my weeks got longer. I had been working six long days per week for some time and desperately needed another person on my team. My response shocked me. "Talk to me," he said, "when you're coming in every Sunday."

To be fair, I had approached my job interviews positioning myself strictly as a business asset, so it really shouldn't have surprised me when I was treated that way. I offered performance, and my bosses took me at my word. This began to deeply affect my attitude toward work and myself. I continued to be successful, but was often exhausted, distracted and sad.

Finally, I decided to try something different. I decided to look for a new boss who was skilled at leading a team of people, not a pack of wolves.

I spoke to some senior managers. I found the nerve to challenge each one of them to talk to me about what it might be like to work for them. At last I met Russell, a top leader with a great reputation in a progressive corporation.

Russell had a very rich spiritual life and a positive, supportive disposition. Everything about his personality convinced me that he would be the right leader for me.

Another nice surprise came out of all this. In addition to working for a great boss, I discovered that the other people who worked for Russell were also terrific. Not a spoiled banana in the bunch. It seems that good people have a knack for finding other good people, regardless of their backgrounds and skill levels. Russell opened my eyes once again to the joys and possibilities of work.

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### High-Gain Insights

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Whether you've ever been involved in choosing or being chosen by a dog, choosing the bosses for whom you want to work might become one of the most important skills you learn in your working life. When bosses begin to understand that you have a choice to work for them or someone else, they may want to focus on becoming better bosses. Everybody wins when that happens.

Furthermore, people don't leave companies, they leave people. If you want to be happier in your job, it might help if you began by more consciously choosing the person for whom you want to work, and the *culture* in which you want to work. It's a skill you can learn. And it's an empowering and career-savvy move. Earlier in this chapter, we saw how Patrick determined that he was looking for five characteristics in a boss:

1. Someone he could trust and someone who trusted him.
2. Someone he respected and someone who respected him.
3. Someone who gave him clear and measurable goals.
4. Someone who believed in developing a strong team mentality.
5. Someone who believed in helping him grow, was a good coach, and invested in his development.

What characteristics are important to you when you think about choosing a boss?

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Author Leo Buscaglia once wrote, "What we call the secret of happiness is no more a secret than our willingness to choose life." Once you put your mind to it, you may be surprised at the number of choices available to you. Make an important commitment to your working life by following some practical ideas:

First, determine the top five most important characteristics you are looking for in a boss. Once you know the characteristics you would like in a boss, make a plan that details how you'd go about finding the person for whom you would most want to work:

1. Talk to people in your company or your prospective company about their bosses.

2. Talk to the Human Resources department.
3. Talk to people outside your company about their bosses and culture.
4. Evaluate your current boss objectively.
5. Put together a short but insight-generating set of questions (based on the characteristics) you want to ask your potential new boss. Here are some questions you might consider:
  - What increases or decreases your trust in someone for whom you work?
  - What increases or decreases your respect for a boss?
  - How does the boss foster his/her team?
  - How much time does the boss spend coaching and developing people? What level of investment do you make?
  - What would the goals and objectives for the position be and how would they be measured?

Then make the bold decision to either stay with your current boss or take steps to find and move to a boss who will be a big part of supporting your success and joy at work.

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"Destiny is not a matter of chance, it's a matter of choice; it's not a thing to be waited for, but a thing to be achieved."

— William Jennings Bryan