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CARROT AND THE STICK

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You, young man, are a know-it-all, nefarious nincompoop. That's an enraged editor (with a liking for alliteration) to one of my fellow young reporters in the days when you could happily call an employee a "nefarious" and a "nincompoop" and not be hit with a bullying allegation.

Ah, those were the days, bosses sigh everywhere. Newsrooms were robust and eclectic places, where under-the-weather journos could pretend they were out doing a story and curl up in the huge floor-to-ceiling cupboards behind the subeditor's desk, pulling the sliding door shut and recuperate in the cool dark for a few hours.

Ah, those were the days, employees sigh. Just in time as we return to work this month, shaking sand from our feet and before bedsores from all those afternoon kindly naps set in, here's a question or two: What kind of boss or manager do you work for? **Or what kind of boss or manager are you?**

If you work for someone who doesn't give praise, poor you. **If you are a manager or boss who doesn't give positive feedback, why the hell not?**

The carrot is more powerful than the stick. A young woman I knew recently came home from her internship with the words "remarkable" ringing in her ears. She was sailing. Someone had called her remarkable.

Frankly, we all should be called remarkable at least once in our lives, don't you reckon? What a powerful word! You'd work twice as hard for a boss who thinks you are remarkable.

Another young woman I know in retail had, as a result of the mystery shopping rating experience, been given a possible 111 per cent out of 100 per cent for her good service. She, too, was on a high.

Sometimes, employees think they are doing a terrible job because no one gives them feedback. And feedback costs nothing. The carrot works so much better than the stick. Speaking to a corporate middle manager the other day, he was talking about an employee who was a dream: quietly efficient, self-starter, never a worry. "She's great," he said.

I asked if he had ever told her that. Ever said how much he appreciates what she does. No. **We are so quick to nail people when something goes wrong, and so reluctant to praise.** What's that about? Why don't managers and bosses tell someone they did a remarkable job? I asked a HR person who gave the most cynical of answers. "Simple. Scared they'd ask for more money."

Maybe we need reminding that no matter how bad your boss is, he's not the infamous Edward "Tiger Mike" Davis. In *More Letters of Note: Correspondence Deserving of a Wider Audience*, compiled by Shaun Usher, there is a series of memos by Tiger Mike, pumped out on Tiger Oil Company letterhead, with the striking logo of a tiger and oil well. Usher writes: "From the offices of the now defunct but at the time Houstonbased Tiger Oil Co came a batch of curiously entertaining memos. All sent by the firm's CEO. Tiger Mike he was called. His management style was no secret within the industry, however, in the early 2000s, 25 years after his company filed for bankruptcy, his spiky inter-office communications famously appeared online for all to see. A selection of his greatest hits appear here with his blessing."

On gossip, he took to the typewriter vigorously: "Idle conversation and gossip in this office among employees will result in immediate termination. Don't talk about other people and other things in this office. DO YOUR JOBS AND KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT!"

On swearing, he had a unique approach: "I swear, but since I am the owner of this company, that is my privilege, and this privilege is not to be interpreted as the same for any employee. That differentiates me from you, and I want to keep it that way. There will be absolutely no swearing, by any employee, male or female, in this office, ever."

Sure, his memos are awful but reading them somehow wouldn't you prefer that directness to some of the passive-aggressive tactics that flourish in some offices. At least Tiger Mike didn't leave you guessing.

Although, he would not have been a fan of what's happening over at the LA headquarters of Zappos, online shoe and clothing company, where no one and everyone is now boss.

"Are Bosses Necessary?" writes Jerry Useem in last month's *The Atlantic*, exploring big changes at Zappos, "until recently the world's happiest shoe store". By order of the CEO, Tony Hsieh, the company abolished managers, eliminated job titles, denounced its organisational hierarchy and vested all authority in a 10,000-word constitution that spells out a radical new system of self-governance.

Useem writes: "Holacracy, it's called, and it makes all previous moves toward 'employee empowerment' look like the mild concessions of an 18th-century monarch. Freed from direct supervision, employees are expected to join various impermanent democratic assemblies called 'circles' (headed, but not run, by a 'lead link'), in which they will essentially propose their own job descriptions, ratify the 'roles' of others, and decide what projects the group should undertake. The constitution was written by Brian Robertson, a Philadelphia entrepreneur unaffiliated with Zappos who'd grown disaffected with standard management practices. Employees at Zappos, the paper said, have met the development 'with everything from cautious embrace to outright revulsion'."

Useem asks if this experiment is just the latest sign that information technology is allowing the emergence of a new form of organisation.

"It's not hard to imagine a future in which the only thing strange about what's going on at Zappos is that it ever seemed strange at all."

Whether a future-style Zappos anti-boss or old-style Tiger Mike, it seems communication clearly is key. Maybe someone should have read one of Tiger Mike's memos to disgraced federal minister Jamie Briggs: Davis wrote a five-page memo to his geologists and engineers in 1978 which included: "When you are on the road or out doing my business, that is exactly what I expect you to do 100 per cent. I don't not want any ... drinking or carousing around on my money." (Carousing, such an underused word these days.)