"The truth is nobody can replace Peter Drucker. He was one of a kind."
—*from the Foreword by* WARREN G. BENNIS

Management CASES

REVISED EDITION

PETER F.
DRUCKER

REVISED AND UPDATED BY
JOSEPH A. MACIARIELLO

Case Number 29

Can You Manage Your Boss?

After four years of working under Pete Webster, Larry Frankenmuth had had it. The work itself was fine—he was in charge of the company's four metalworking plants, knew the work, liked it, and was sure he did a good job. His subordinates were great. Every one of the four plant managers was first-rate, easy to work with, competent, on top of his job. The company was fine and clearly going places. The pay was good.

But *Webster!* Webster was a pain in every part of Larry's body from top to toe. Never an encouraging word, only grunts or criticism. Larry slaved on the memoranda and reports he sent up to Webster's office—and then he never heard anything about them. He always made sure to be in Webster's office first thing in the morning with anything important—or to call him at 8:30 sharp. His first boss had drilled that into him when Larry started as a manufacturing engineer. Yet Webster always acted as if Larry had broken all Ten Commandments when he knocked at the door and asked whether he could come in. "What have you to see me about *again*, Frankenmuth?" he'd growl. But he'd also bite his head off if Larry did not tell him to the last detail every single thing that was going on, and especially any bad news ahead. But the worst thing about Webster was his appalling illiteracy. Larry Frankenmuth—with a BA and an MA in mechanical engineering from MIT—had then, on his own time, gone and taken all the courses he could get in modern management, in modern production, in operations research, and in quantitative methods. Then to

have to work for a boss who hadn't finished high school! Webster had gone into the army at the end of his junior year in high school and then started as a machinist when he came back from the service. He probably couldn't even do long division and surely could not follow the simplest regression analysis. It was too much!

And so Larry Frankenmuth decided to leave. He realized that he had made the right decision on a Sunday evening when he had worked at home on a careful study of order patterns and production schedules that added up to a recommendation to change production scheduling, inventory control, and shipping schedules for all four plants of the metalworking division. It was the most searching analysis he had yet made, and he felt very good about it. But as he was about to put the pages together for the following morning, he suddenly realized that there was absolutely no point in showing the work to Webster. "The old coot just couldn't understand," he said to himself. "And if he could, he'd still be much too reactionary to make any change in what has been procedure since before I was born. He'll never even read the report, I bet. And instead of discussing the figures, he'll treat me to one of his endless anecdotes about the good old days. I just can't take any more of it."

And so without even telling his wife, Lois, he set about finding another job. He had little difficulty in finding one. The new job was not quite as big, not quite as well paid, and with a company that had only limited growth opportunities, but the company was a highly technological one, and so Larry's management science was fully appreciated. Indeed, Larry was now the one who felt somewhat undereducated, since so many of his new associates had PhDs. Lois approved: she had long known how frustrated Larry had been. Webster approved in his boorish fashion. When Larry went in to tell him, he only said, "I won't try at talk you out of it. I have to tell you, Frankenmuth, that I could not and would not have recommended you for a promotion. Your leaving makes it much easier for all of us." And so Larry packed his papers and prepared to move out of the office in which he had suffered for four long years.

Two days before he left, he had an unexpected visitor: Frank Sartorius, the plant manager who was to take Larry's job. Sartorius's selection had surprised Larry. Larry had been sure Webster would pick the oldest and most conventional of his four plant managers. Instead he chose the youngest—Sartorius was well under forty—the most innovative, the boldest. In fact, Larry had to admit to himself that he would have hesitated to take the gamble. Sartorius had been plant manager for only a few years, and Larry doubted whether he was really ready yet. Larry had gotten along fairly well with Sartorius, but did not consider himself close to the man. Larry was therefore somewhat surprised when Sartorius called up, said that he was coming to the headquarters city in a day or two, and would like a private, off-the-record session at Larry's home. He was even more surprised when Sartorius said, "Larry, I was quite shocked when I heard that you were leaving. I was even more shocked when Webster called me and told me I'd take over from you. I didn't expect a big promotion for another three, four years, if then. What can you tell me that will help me?"

Larry spent an hour or two discussing the plants and their managers, and another hour talking about the relationships and problems inside the company—in particular about a long-standing feud with Purchasing and about the rather prickly Personnel Department and its failure to back operating management against the union. Finally he said, "Frank, I guess you know most of this." And Frank Sartorius nodded. "But," continued Larry, "the really important thing about this job isn't the plants, it isn't Purchasing or Personnel or the accountants. It is that impossible SOB, the boss. He doesn't read a line—you might as well write on water. He never has a word of praise, never, but is quick to criticize. He expects you to keep him informed about everything and is positively indecent in his insistence that you inform him ahead of time of anything unexpected. Yet he bites your head off when you come in to tell him. He is such an old reactionary that you just don't dare propose any change. You'll have no real trouble with any part of your job—it's in good shape, and the men are a pleasure to work with—but you just won't be able to manage the boss."

Larry Frankenmuth soon forgot all about his old company—the new job turned out to be a great deal tougher than he had expected and kept him fully occupied. He once ran into old Webster at the airport and asked him how Sartorius was doing—only to get a gruff "Why should I tell you?" for an answer. So he was quite surprised to read three years later, in *The Wall Street Journal*, that Frank Sartorius had been appointed to succeed Pete Webster as manufacturing vice president when Webster moved up to executive vice president in charge of the metalworking and mechanical divisions. "I must send Sartorius a note of congratulations when I get home tonight," he said to himself. But when he got back home he found that Sartorius had anticipated him. On the hall table was a huge flowerpot with a handwritten note from Sartorius.

Dear Larry Frankenmuth:

You will have heard that I have been promoted to VP-Manufacturing—and I owe it all to you and want to say "Thank You." You have taught me that I had to learn to manage the boss. And you told me how to do it.

Cordially,
Frank Sartorius

QUESTIONS

Can you tell the dumbfounded Larry Frankenmuth what Sartorius meant? And what did Larry tell Sartorius about managing that tough, reactionary SOB of a boss, Pete Webster?