

Be the Best Boss you never had

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NAWE'S SELF-CARE SERIES

It was a joke my father never tired of when I first started freelancing, thirty years ago. "Has your boss given you a bit of time off this evening/weekend/summer?" he would say every time I saw him. It never failed to make him laugh. But of course it held a truth. When you're freelancing, you have all the responsibilities of a manager as well as all the duties of the worker. You have to be hands on and head up, to get down with the worms and up with the birds, to see the bigger picture as well as the detail, and where would this list be without a mention of the woods and the trees.

For many of us freelancers it can feel easier to just keep trundling from gig to gig without stopping much to look at the map. But that can bring frustrations, too.

What if you had someone who was really looking out for you and your career, who was there for you, whenever called upon, as a wise and benign mentor, a sounding board, an empathetic and concerned other with their own perspective on things, different from yours. Someone you could discuss problems and brainstorm opportunities with?

And what if that person was already right there, within you? No need to make an appointment. Their door is always open and you can walk in any time, sit down with them and have a chat.

What I'm talking about here, of course, is using a journal and a variety of journaling techniques to invent and develop a relationship with your own inner boss. An alter ego through whom you can access your own higher wisdom and make sure you're developing yourself and

your career as you'd ideally like to, plotting a trajectory, not just keeping the show on the road.

Quarterly Review – Unsent Letter or Dialogue

One way to do this is to give yourself a quarterly review (more often if you want). Write a report from your boss to yourself, pointing out your strengths and successes as well as your areas for improvement. Then write your reply, which might include a wish for greater responsibility, more challenge in your work, some training, or a release from working with a difficult client, and then see what your boss has to say back.

For this, you can use the journaling technique of the Unsent Letter (or email). Alternatively you can write a Dialogue, and set it out as a mini-play.

The Unsent Letter is often used to help us express and clarify our feelings towards someone we're angry with, intimidated by or who makes us feel uncomfortable. You can also write letters to people who have died, moved away or haven't been born yet. As suggested above, you can reverse the technique and write letters to yourself from others, too.

The Dialogue is a written conversation in which you write both parts. You can dialogue with anyone or anything – a person, place, object, body part, event or feeling.

Here's how a dialogue with your boss might begin:

Boss: How are you doing?

Me: So, so.

Boss: Take a seat and tell me all about it.

Me: Well... how long have you got...?!

The important thing with all journaling exercises is to make sure you read back what you've written and then immediately write a brief reflection on it. This helps us make conscious what was unconscious, enabling us to spot themes and patterns we can act on. The next step is to work with your inner boss to draw up some action points and deadlines. And then, of course, to act on them.

Inventory

Another useful journaling technique for us freelancers is the Inventory. Here, you make a list of the most important areas of your working life and write a paragraph or two about each one. Here's a simple structure you can use:

- Where am I now?
- Where do I want to be?
- By when?
- What will it take to close the gap?

The trick with all journal writing is to be as unselfconscious as possible. That's the way you get the richest insights. This generally means writing fast, without censoring or editing, and not worrying about spelling, grammar, punctuation or repeating yourself (this is often a good guide to our concerns or obsessions, as are typing or spelling errors). It's as if your writing is doing your thinking for you. And remember, you don't have to show your journal writing to anyone, ever, unless you choose to.

So, where to begin? First, buy yourself that shiny new notebook you've been coveting. Then, I'd advocate having a crack at the classic journaling technique of the Character Sketch.

Character Sketch

I'd suggest writing two of these. The first should be your description of your ideal boss. Give him or her a

name, a personality, and plenty of individual quirks and characteristics. The second should be a character sketch of yourself, written from the point of view of the new boss you've just invented. What will they tell you about yourself that you didn't already know? What will you change? How will it help you to grow? These are just some of the questions to which your journal may have the answers.

There are many more useful journaling techniques, of course, including ones that can help you maximise time and efficiency, manage your finances, and find ways to deal with difficult people. A lot of the best tried and tested techniques are contained in Kathleen Adams' classic text 'Journal to the Self', subtitled 'Twenty-two paths to personal growth' (Grand Central Publishing, £11.50)

If you haven't journaled before and it sounds like just another chore to add to your already groaning workload, think again. I urge you to try it. One of the joys of journaling is that it doesn't take long – most writing processes take 5-8 minutes – it's always fun and surprising, and it's likely to yield helpful insights every time you sit down to write. It's a small investment of time that could save you days, months, years even of dissatisfaction or career stagnation, and help you maximise your potential and achieve your dreams. It's a good idea to schedule your journaling sessions – put them in your diary as you would any business appointment – and keep journaling until it becomes a habit. You'll soon find yourself wondering how you ever managed without your clear-sighted friend, and may soon find yourself journaling once a week or more.

Adams writes: "Most of the popular speakers on the motivational circuit tout journal writing as a secret of success. As a time and task management tool, your journal has few peers. Oprah Winfrey, Tony Robbins and Steven Covey are only three of the highly successful people who have said they rely on their journals as essential to their professional and personal achievements."

So, here's the challenge: set a timer eight minutes, pick up your notebook and pen, and describe the best boss you never had. Then you'll have a lifelong ally to help you work through your day to day issues, reach your goals and shape your career. And, of course, make sure they give you plenty of time off.



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