

The Boss I Did Not See Becoming My Friend

A tribute to Dr. Marat Zanov

Jeffrey E. Hansen, PhD



Along Came Marat

I was about three years into my work with the Department of Defense, pretty settled in my ways, when along came Dr. Marat Zanov, my new clinical supervisor. Neither of us quite knew what we were getting into. A clinical psychologist with several advanced degrees and a background that, the more I learned about it, made me wonder how many lives this man had already lived.

He came from what was previously the Soviet Union and eventually made his way to America, became a United States citizen, and served in the Air Force. Somewhere along the way, there was acting in Los Angeles, work on a software app, and even motorcycles until a pretty serious accident put a damper on that. You name it, Marat seemed to have done it.

He spoke flawless English with a slight Russian accent that somehow added to his presence. He could fill a room without raising his voice. But when he first arrived, he came in softly. He watched. He studied the environment. He took some time to understand the people he would be supervising.

We Did Not Exactly Start Out as Friends

Now, I need to confess something right up front. He had a job I would have loved. Here was this younger man, and yes, I have to admit, an impressively handsome younger man, becoming my supervisor. I had more years in the saddle as a therapist, and now he was going to be supervising me. That brought a little tension. All right, more than a little.

But I also had to admit that he knew his stuff. He was bright, capable, confident, and serious about doing a good job. Whatever feelings I had about not having that position, those were mine to work through. They were not his fault.

Marat believed in leadership, structure, and knowing what was happening under his watch. I understood that. But somewhere along the way, I had acquired the nickname Maverick, and there was a reason for it. I tend to treat a rule as a suggestion when it gets in the way of patient care. I am not saying that is always a virtue. It is simply how I have sometimes operated. When I believe someone needs an advocate, I have a hard time standing down. And asking permission has not always been my first move. Now, put yourself in Marat's shoes. You are smart, conscientious, and trying to do a good job, and here comes Dr. Hansen, already doing something you have not even had a chance to approve. A boss's worst nightmare? Well, maybe not every day. But I certainly had my moments.

You can imagine how that went. Marat wanted to lead well. I wanted room to do what I believed needed doing. Sometimes those two things worked together. Sometimes they collided pretty hard.

One day Marat came up to me and said, "I don't know why I tell you what to do. You're going to do what you think you need to do anyway, right?"

"Yeah, that's right, boss."

He had me figured out on that one.

When our clinic chief, Major Salvatore "Sal" Bitondo, deployed, Marat was promoted into that position. Another job I would have loved. Again, that was not something Marat did to me. He was moving forward because he had the ability to move forward. But it added another layer to a relationship that already had a few rough edges.

The interesting thing about Marat was that people wanted to love him. He had that kind of charisma. There was something about him that drew people in. But his manner could also be brash, and sometimes the authority came through more clearly than the person behind it.

One day, I came into his office with three markers.

"Marat, here you go. Green, yellow, and red. Put a check on the whiteboard outside your door. Green means the coast is clear. Yellow means proceed with caution. Red means stay the hell away."

That was my attempt to reach him. Subtle, I know. But underneath the humor was something I wanted him to hear. I told him that people wanted to love him. He had so much to offer, but they needed to know whether the hand he extended was there to help them or come down on them. I could see his potential. I could also see how his approach sometimes got in the way of people experiencing it.

At one point, during a particularly difficult and highly visible clinical case, we had a serious disagreement about my decision to seek legal guidance. I am leaving the clinical details out because they do not belong here. What matters is that the disagreement became heated enough that I told him to leave my office.

“Marat, we are done here.”

We had reached that point.

Now, telling your boss to leave your office even though you felt it was justified is probably getting the chain of command a little backwards. It is also not generally considered a career-enhancing move. But there I was, being Maverick again. My tone and timing could have used a little work. Not exactly my finest professional moment.

Then Came the Pandemic

Then came the pandemic, and I saw another side of Marat. We were one of the largest clinics in the hospital, and suddenly we were sent home to work remotely. Everything about how we worked changed. We still had patients who needed us, staff who needed direction, and uncertainty coming at us from every side.

I watched Marat rise to that occasion. He kept the clinic together. He kept us connected. He found a rhythm in circumstances none of us had experienced before. And the compassionate side of him became unmistakable. He cared about his people. He made us feel protected, supported, and remembered. He had our backs.

That is leadership. And he deserved to be recognized for it. I wrote a commendation for him through the department. I wanted people above him to know what I had seen and what he had done for us.

What I Had to Learn

I could tell this story as though I was the principled clinician and he was the difficult boss. But that would leave out a good portion of the truth. I could be difficult, too. My intensity, my tendency to come in strong, my certainty that I was right, all of that came into the room with me. I was pretty good at seeing what he needed to change. Seeing what I needed to change took a little longer.

Sometimes you get insights from the most unexpected places. For me, it happened while watching Tom Hanks play Mr. Rogers in *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*. In the movie, a cynical, difficult reporter is assigned to write about Rogers. He comes with some sharp edges and a fair amount of pain behind them. Rogers takes an interest in the person beneath all of that. He listens, asks questions, and stays present, even when the conversation gets uncomfortable. He reaches him with patience and love, and over time, the reporter begins to change.

Somewhere in that movie, the light bulb went on. I started thinking about Marat and the way I approached him. I could come in so ready to make my point that I was not leaving much room to understand his. I wanted him to see where I was coming from. But how much effort was I making to understand where he was coming from?

Maybe I needed to soften a little. Here was a man trying to do a difficult job, with people like me making it a little more interesting. I cared about him, but I was not always very good at letting him see that. What might happen if I brought that care into the room? If I listened a little longer, came in a little less certain, and let him know I was on his side?

I was not going to become Mr. Rogers overnight. Marat would probably have been a little suspicious if I had. But I could come to him with more patience and more love. That was something I needed to change in myself, and of all people, Mr. Rogers helped me see it.

Somewhere along the way, we also began sharing our stories. I came to understand that there were difficult chapters in his early life. Those details are his, and I will leave them with him. But knowing more about each other helped me see beyond the tough exterior.

We all bring a history into the room. We talk about developmental wounds in our clinical work, but having a doctorate does not mean we have somehow escaped our own. I had mine. I had my need to matter, to be heard, to have my experience respected. I began to make more room for what he might be carrying, too.

And think about what this man had accomplished. He left the country of his birth, a place fraught with challenges, pain, and complexity. He built a life in America, served his adopted country, pursued an impressive education, and kept reaching. That took something extraordinary.

Marat intrigued me. I wanted to understand the man behind the title. There was something mysterious about Marat that captured my attention and kept drawing me back. Just when I thought I had a handle on him, there was more to understand.

Another time he came up to me and said, "What are you doing, Dr. Hansen? You studying me?"

"Yeah, boss, I am."

And I was. To this day, I still do not fully understand him. He is one of the most compelling, interesting men I have ever known.

In time, where tension had existed, friendship began to fill the space. Our clashes became things we could look back on with a different understanding. He made me look at myself. I like to think I gave him something to consider, too. We began to recognize what the other brought to the work.

He had leadership abilities I did not. I can say that without diminishing myself. He earned the positions he held. He kept climbing because he had the competence to carry greater responsibility. And he respected my abilities as a clinician, particularly in trauma. Eventually, I think he figured out that the best way to work with me was to give me some room. If you trust me and let me do the work, I will work my heart out for you.

I would have done that for Marat. I still would. I would cross a desert for this man.

Thank You Marat

Marat eventually moved into leadership beyond the clinic and now holds a senior position on the East Coast. We exchange texts and talk from time to time. I am proud of him, although I wish there were fewer miles between us. I would have liked more time to deepen our friendship. More conversations. More opportunities to know the man I had spent so much energy colliding with.

I wish we lived closer. But I am grateful for the friendship we built and the connection we still have.

And there is something else I owe him. Marat and Sal eventually gave me room to grow in directions that have become the mainstay of this stage of my career. Writing. Publishing. Speaking. Developing programs. We had disagreements about some of that, too. It was not always a smooth road. But they gave me room, and I did something with it.

Marat climbed into levels of Department of Defense leadership that, given my particular style, were probably never going to be my path. I have found my place in other ways. I can appreciate his accomplishments and be grateful for my own.

There is an old verse that comes to mind when I think about us: "Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend." Proverbs 27:17.

When I think about the tension Marat created, or, more honestly, the tension we created between the two of us, that verse fits. You risk cutting each other to pieces, and initially, I think we were doing some of that. But in the end, we sharpened one another. We made each other look at things we might otherwise have avoided. And for that, I am deeply, deeply, deeply thankful. I miss the hell out of him.

So, Marat, thank you. Thank you for making me grow. Thank you for being a tough boss, even when I was not especially interested in having one. Thank you for listening, for growing yourself, and for softening in the places that allowed people to get closer to you.

Thank you for seeing something in me worth respecting, even when I made supervising me more difficult than it needed to be. And thank you for extending your hand in friendship. I did not see that coming.

I thought I had gotten a new supervisor. Somewhere along the way, I gained a friend I love and a colleague I deeply respect.

I am grateful for you, brother.