Bad Bosses and How Not to Be One

All workplaces would run smoothly if all bosses learned to live by the Golden Rule of Management: Manage as you would like to be managed.

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There is worldwide evidence that a nation’s management talent is one of the most important factors in the growth and survival of its economy and society. Also, it is equally evident that people in managerial positions face a variety of challenges, but perhaps the most difficult is the smooth and effective management of knowledge workers. As we enter the information age in the workplace, many employees add value simply because of what they know. They are usually referred to as knowledge workers, and how these employees are managed is seen as a major factor in determining which firm will be successful in the future. For example, the symbols of the old world were factories, land, gold, and oil. The Internet, computers, and information are the symbols of the current age. As Bill Gates said, “the only factory asset we have is human imagination.”

In his 1990 book Powershift, Alvin Toffler argued that in a highly turbulent economic and social environment, there will be a generalized erosion of power and authority. At the present time, in all types of organizations, power is shifting not just at the top management level but at lower levels as well. For example, knowledge workers believe they have the right to work autonomously. According to M.A. Von Glinow’s 1988 book The New Professional, knowledge workers tend to identify more with their profession than they do with any organization. Consequently, the realities of today’s workforce contradict traditional management views and assumptions. In their 2002 book Powerful Leadership, Eric G. Stephan and R. Wayne Pace, maintain that the traditional rigid, authoritarian, drill-sergeant style of management will not foster a good working climate for knowledge workers and for the different components of the diverse workforce.

Most authoritarian-type bosses have never received formal education or training in the art of today’s managing style. They have stumbled their way into positions of authority and imitated the authority figures they have encountered and observed in their careers. Ordinarily, these bosses are handpicked for their loyalty at the expense of competence. For some of these bosses, dealing with the changes in the work environment is torturous and results in frustration, pessimism, and bitterness toward their organization. It is no wonder that a certain number of difficult bosses are consistently and energetically engaged in counterproductive manage-
rrial behavior such as deviance, incivility, or antisocial behavior. Research suggests that, when managerial civility is absent, work relations are strained. Rude treatment can make workers unhappy, and this can lead to cynicism, aggressive behavior, higher turnovers, lower productivity, and lost customers—and it can negatively affect a company’s bottom line.

It is a widespread observation that, when difficult bosses feel pressed or threatened by change, they often demonstrate just how human they are by striking out and taking aim at subordinates. In fact, for many difficult bosses, change will show the emergence of a siege mentality.

**A Catalog of Bad Bosses**

It is interesting to note, however, that there is a new trend in the way employees deal with and attempt to understand their difficult bosses. For example, many attend seminars, purchase books, and read articles on the subject. The following is a summary profile of difficult bosses, which can easily reflect a recognizable pattern of toxic and destructive behavior that will lead to managerial failure.

**The Incompetent**

It is not always easy to spot incompetent bosses. Most are clever enough to disguise their incompetence. Sometimes they hide behind a façade of smooth talk and big words. Sometimes they hide behind a façade of expensive, fancy clothes. In addition, they tend to be overly impressed by idiotic fads that sweep certain cultures. For some employees, however, such a boss is a prime example of the Peter Principle—men or women who have risen to the level of their incompetence—named after the 1968 book *The Peter Principle* by Dr. Laurence J. Peter. Specifically, incompetent bosses tend to utilize the scapegoat strategy by accusing others of creating problems and never taking responsibility themselves. They feel this strategy is a good cover-up for their failure and professional inadequacy.

**The Bully**

Basically, bully bosses practice management by terror. These bullies self-administer a kind of emotional anesthesia that diminishes their awareness of harm done, allowing them to act as tyrants without experiencing discomforting pain themselves. They tend to display emotional swings and insensitivity, and they require enemies in order to function properly. According to a May 14, 2007, *Business Week* article “Try This Suit on for Size, Boss,” several states, are considering laws that could make workplace bullying an “unlawful employment practice” and give victims the right to sue an employer that fails to prevent it.

**The Crook**

These bosses prey on others for their self-gain, taking credit for work that was not their own or using their power to extort favors from others. When they are under fire, crooks fabricates incidents, falsify data, and manipulate people to protect themselves. In his 1994 article in *Human Relations* “Petty Tyranny in Organizations,” Blake Ashforth labeled this type of boss an “organizational mugger” because of...
a lack of integrity and a belief that the end justifies the means.

**The Know-It-All**

Know-it-all bosses have the "I'm always right" attitude, which is a constant irritant to subordinates. When anyone disagrees with them, they react as if it were a personal contradiction rather than a simple difference of opinion, cutting off the conversation in an obvious huff. They usually act in a superior, pompous, and pontifical manner. This self-serving attitude is a major contributor to the credibility problem with subordinates.

**The Dodger**

It appears that dodgers have never heard of the saying, "lead, follow, or get the hell out of the way." Dodgers are immobilized by a conflict, and they will seldom discuss a topic that might provoke a strong negative reaction. They often turn this style into a virtue by using phrases such as "you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar" or extol the wisdom of "causing no ripples." Many of their employees recognize their reluctance to confront questions of priority, impose a tight timetable, or personally be responsible for anything that makes life difficult for others. Dodgers are under the continuous feeling of being inadequate and overwhelmed by incoming demands for action and decisions. In addition, when they are called upon to take a stand or to be forthright, dodgers will disappoint their employees and often disappear.

**The Walking Policy Manual**

Many employees refer to these bosses as walking policy manuals. They place a premium on precedent, experience, and tradition. When they are asked any question about their decision, they will cite the policy, procedure, or rule they applied in reaching their decision. They stick to policy, no matter how dubious its origin, and forget objectives. However, when they begin to doubt the rightness of their decision, they schedule constant meetings for creation of consensus that focuses on the meaningless details and arrives at no concrete decisions. Having this type of boss in any organization can produce a whole culture dependent on meaningless process. At the same time, it can lead employees to the most damaging varieties of stress – helplessness, anger, and frustration.

**Remedies: The Golden Road to Becoming a Better Boss**

Organizational life can be full of stress, tension, frustration, and pressure. Or it can be full of challenges, opportunities, rewards, and personal growth. Having to work with difficult bosses is one of the more common and important reasons why employees dislike their jobs. In his book *Management*, Peter Drucker wrote that subordinates "...have a right to be managed with competence, dedication, and achievement. Subordinates have a right to a boss who performs, for otherwise they themselves cannot perform." That is, the general rule may be laid down that bad employee performance reflects the existence of bad management.

Those who want to be a better boss and avoid these paths to managerial self-destruction would be wise to remember that managing involves dealing with people who have unique emotions, perceptions, cultural experiences, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Managing would be easy if all bosses lived by the Golden Rule of Management: Manage as you would like to be managed. As a result, regardless of temperament or personality type, the following points will help bosses cope with the challenges of managing in today's work environment:

**Demonstrate a High Level of Integrity.** Everyone agrees that integrity and honesty ensure that a boss behaves ethically and is worthy of employees' trust and confidence. To ensure this practice, openness is needed to receive positive inputs. Always keep in mind that integrity and honesty breed trust, and that will produce team action. A boss can be fair, credible, and trustworthy with employees and involve them in the development of working plans and activities without compromising standards or being permissive. When
employees are trusted, they tend to reciprocate.

Remove Fear from the Workplace. Bosses certainly have the power to make the work life of an employee miserable. They can withhold raises, favor others with the interesting jobs, and engage in other ways to harass employees. However, fear is a powerful force. It can be a source of malaise, be devastating on workplace morale, and be fatal to organizational success. Management studies have consistently shown that there is a causal link between work climate and quality of work. Given these realities, bosses should strive to provide a consistent and supportive environment that is free of fear, and seek to nurture an atmosphere of mutual boss-employee respect.

Fight for Employees. Employees will be more satisfied with their jobs if they feel that their boss is on their side and will aggressively support them. This includes promoting with upper management their careers and access to resources to do their jobs.

Help Them Save Face. People who feel denigrated seldom change productively. If the behavior of an employee needs changing, try to stay focused on what needs to be changed. Avoid the accusatory practice since it will not lead to self-development. The practice of saving face will present the boss in a positive light and will improve the boss' chances of closing down the offensive activities of employees.

Overcome a Lack of Trust. Some bosses are perennially suspicious of others. They may have been indoctrinated to distrust others by figures important in their lives. A more effective approach is to encourage bosses to open up about flaws in their performance, and bosses may want to consider the help of a professional counselor. Although the lack of trust disorder may lead to a state of paranoia, it can emotionally overload the boss and make it difficult for him to think rationally.

References