



INSPIRING WAVES OF CHANGE

MANAGING BAD BOSSES

Are you in a situation where you are stressed considerably because you can't stand your boss? Do you hate your job because of him/her? Have you been in a situation where you would just like to 'tell your boss to go fly kites' and walk out of your job? If all the above is true, then I suppose you are part of the many employees in Malaysia who work for this group of people who are called 'bad bosses' i.e. bosses who are strict, unappreciative, hot-tempered, rude and nasty. In the course of my work as a training consultant, this is definitely the number one problem that my participants bring up to me to try to get my advice.

Bad bosses have always been part of the work landscape. Today, however, we are seeing more of them as a result of the greater pressures and stress that come with any managerial position. Managers in general are over-extended in terms of work as a result of 'leaner' structures in organizations. They have to do more with less. As they are not able to cope, they take it out on their subordinates, consciously or unconsciously. And this makes the situation worse as subordinates who are subject to 'unnecessary stress' by their bosses are de-motivated and usually retaliate with lower quantity and quality of work, which serves to continue the vicious circle.

But what is a bad boss? Often, a bad boss is all in the eyes of the beholder. One person's boss from hell may be another person's boss from heaven. If you are the type of person who needs regular direction, for example, then you will love a boss who is a micro-manager. On the other hand, if you have strong needs for autonomy you will hate this same boss as you can't work with somebody looking over your shoulder all the time.

TYPES OF BAD BOSSES

The key to getting on with a boss is to manage him by understanding his underlying motivations, which may be different from what you think. I will take the liberty here to state some of the different types of 'bad' bosses that I have met. If you're a manager, look for yourself in some of these descriptions. Obviously, all the characteristics of bad managers cannot be covered. However I am most certain that many will be very familiar with the ones covered here.

The autocratic manager

This dinosaur type manager sadly still exists in current organizations. They have a belief that since they are the managers, they are the ones who are the intelligent ones, they are the only ones who can make decisions and they are the only ones who can 'think' in the organization. In that sense, they are like carpenters who only have a hammer in their tool box. Every problem is a nail and therefore the hammer has to be used all the time. They are not aware of other management tools and they don't even bother trying to find out.

The clueless manager

Some managers simply don't have a clue as to what they're doing. This kind of boss may seem like a dream at first, but lack of substance will tell in the long run and you get frustrated as you are not given enough guidance in your job. You go to him with one problem to solve and you go out of his room with an additional two problems.

The weak manager

These are the types of managers who won't stand up for you. They just toe the party line. They avoid risks and give you vague instructions. When things go well, they take credit and when things go bad, they pounce on you for not adhering to instructions. The word flexibility does not exist in their vocabulary.

The micro-manager

These are the types of managers who do not trust you at all. They want to check and counter check everything that you do. No matter how much detail you give him/her, or how many times you do redo a piece of work, it's still not right. In the process they forget the big picture. They are more interested in the font and the style of presentation of a report rather than the substance of the report.

The hard task master

This is the type of manager who thinks that working late is the hall mark of a good manager. He doesn't have a life, and doesn't expect you to either. As he works late everyday, he expects you to do so too. He is more interested in the symbolic manifestations of work i.e. working late, bringing home work, having lots of meetings etc, rather than the 'real' work output. When you finish a piece of work, which you think you have done well, he tears it apart, so that 'you will have some work to do'. Strangely, after modifying your work a few times, the one that emerges finally is an exact replica of the very first one that you submitted!!

EFFECTIVE WAYS TO HANDLE BAD BOSS'S

Do a reality check on yourself

The first solution in handling a bad boss is an honest analysis of your actions and behavior. Are you a good subordinate? Have you been handling yourself and your job well? If you aren't then perhaps it is not your boss who is the problem but you. Please also remember that all bosses have their own ways to do work and like it or not, it is the subordinates who will have to adapt to their ways. They will be quite reluctant to adapt to yours.

Formal Communication

Regardless of what type of boss you have, an important option you have is to communicate formally with them. Sometimes they may not be aware of their behavior and the aim of the communication process is to let him see your side of the work equation. In the formal meeting, make sure that you talk of the specific behavior in question and tell him how it makes you feel. Leave your emotions at the door, but be prepared for your boss to have an emotional reaction.

Do not make generalized statements like, "you are always nasty" or "everyone in the office does not like the way you manage". Soften your comments and avoid defensiveness by allowing your boss to save face. Praise him if needed initially (obviously he must have his strengths too), so that his defenses may be lowered. When talking about the problem, use statements like "You may not be aware . . ." or "You may not realize . . .". It's possible that your boss is unaware of his/her actions, and this meeting could be very positive for all involved. At the same time, you may realize that you might have made many assumptions about his style of management which may not necessarily be right.

Formal communication may not necessarily solve the problem, but at least you will be sure your boss has been informed of your views, feelings and frustrations. There is no guarantee of success, however, and you need to be aware that your Malaysian boss from a cultural perspective might misinterpret your 'confrontation' as pushy or aggressive behavior. This might lead to an escalation of your conflict with him.

Informal Communication

Most of the time, the recommended action with a bad boss is to take him or her to lunch or a drink after work to discuss the problem in a non-confrontational way. This type of informal encounter will serve to overcome the problem better as the non-work environment may lessen the tension and thus make it more amicable for a more fruitful discussion. Always thank him for taking the time to have the discussion and impress upon him that your only interest in this discussion is to have a more healthy working relationship.

Ganging Up

This might seem to be an unorthodox solution, but it has its strengths. If several people from the same department voice similar views or frustrations, then there is a chance that the head of department might take heed. This voicing of opinions can take place individually or else at a meeting where everyone is

present. If it is the latter, then it has to be handled sensitively, as you do not want to create the impression that there is a mutiny in the department. At the same time, be aware of the fact that there may be some people in the department who might try to gain political mileage out of this situation by being the odd one out of the 'gang' to gain favor. The good thing about 'ganging up' is that it is very difficult for a boss to take the situation lightly as the number of messengers is high, and all carry the same message. Do not however expect the boss to change immediately.

Ask for a Transfer or Resign

If none of these strategies work, then you have two choices. If you really love your job because you are learning a lot and you like the people you're working with, then you will just have to 'bite the bullet' and accept your boss as best you can. Or, if all else fails, ask to be transferred to another department or finally simply hand in your resignation letter. Only you know your own worth, and if you don't feel respected and motivated then just move on. This is a difficult course of action, but one that you must always have as an option. Remember however that the other side may not necessarily be 'greener'.

Conclusion

Managing 'bad' bosses is a very difficult and sensitive exercise. Always remember that finding a perfect boss/employee match is almost impossible. There will always be grounds for conflict in any working relationship. You have to try to work on each other's flaws and strong points to complement your work methods. The onus is on you as the subordinate to adapt to your boss's style of management. A final piece of advice and that is, when dealing with bad bosses the worst thing you can do is simply to do nothing, hoping the problems will get resolved. No job, boss, or company is worth losing your health, sanity, or self-esteem. If you can't find a way to resolve these issues and your boss simply will never change his behavior, then you should immediately start looking for a new job, within or outside the organization. But before you do this, please do carry out an objective performance appraisal on yourself. It might change your mind.