

Dealing with Behavior Issues—in the Boss

By: Louise S. Dunn



8 Out Of 10 Turn Down Huge Salary Increase if it Means Working With “Undesirable” Co-Workers.

What about you? Would you turn down a huge salary increase if it meant working under a bad boss/manager? Or would you take the money and simply shut up and deal with the working conditions – the demands, the explosive outbursts, the covert undermining of your self-worth, or that constant lack of appreciation. Does money make it easier to work with a bad boss?

Chances are, you would respond like many in the survey – relationships and self-worth far outweigh the amount of your pay check. You probably wouldn't take a job under a bad boss – yet some of you are already in the situation and wonder what you can do to improve it. Leaving a job, especially one that is fulfilling and loaded with positive impacts on pets in the community, can be difficult (even it means dealing with a lousy boss or manager). So many of you continue to suffer under the weight of a bad boss. And this extends to others who we may not call “boss” – the receptionist manager, the inventory coordinator, the lead kennel – these are titles for someone who is “in charge of” or the “boss of” others in a particular section of the veterinary practice.

The effects of a bad boss on the team are numerous. Confusion due to a lack of clarity of job tasks, stress, high turnover, poor morale and poor job performance are not only your own symptoms from this bad boss disease, it is also showing up in your co-workers. Even if your co-workers are not directly coming under fire from the bad boss, they are witnessing you or others being subjected to bad boss behavior and displaying the symptoms from that exposure.

Worse yet, it is also affecting your clients and the very patients you all purport to love and treat. Think about it – poor morale often shows up in poor client service. Poor job performance puts patients at risk. A bad boss is not just affecting you, it is a like a bad disease infecting an entire population of co-workers, clients and patients. The sad truth about this problem of a bad boss is that, often times, the business appears to be allowing the bad behavior by not addressing concerns or correcting the behavior.

People Don't Leave Jobs – They Leave Bad Bosses

We have all heard this truism. Numerous surveys and Gallop polls back up this statement in their numbers – A bad boss is the #1 reason people quit a job. Has your practice experienced the exodus of team members due to throwing in the towel when it comes to a boss? Perhaps people quietly left while giving reasons of better opportunity, family demands or change of careers. Others may have quit loudly, informing everyone in advance that they don't get paid enough to put up with the hassles. Some may have been terminated, slowly performing their duties with less enthusiasm and accuracy until management terminated them for poor performance. In any case, people quit or left – keeping silent about real reason for their exit – due to suffering from the effects of a bad boss.

Diagnosing and Treating Bad Boss Syndrome

The point is not to lay blame at the feet of the organization or the people who left without being honest about their reasons. No, the point is to come to a realization that we may be experiencing various forms of bad boss syndrome without even realizing it. It is present in the veterinary practice (the owner, the lead tech, the kennel manager, the inventory coordinator, etc), yet we have trouble identifying it and treating it – thus it gets ignored by the organization and causes a loss of talent.

It may take a professional coach or consultant to help an organization deal with the problem of a bad boss, or it may simply take the efforts of a few key team members to bring about discussion and intervention to salvage the culture, ensure excellent medical care of patients and promote business success. A listing of bad boss behaviors can become exhaustive; consider these four by Kets de Vries as a starting point for treating what ails the relationship between you and your boss.

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"Label"	"Clinical Sign"	"Treatment"
Narcissist	Selfish Inconsiderate Feels Entitled Demands Excessive Attention	Avoid attacking their sense of self Convey respect but do not condone demands
Manic-Depressive	No middle ground on emotion Volatility Stressed	Get them to confront the reality of their behavior Set limits regarding any extreme behaviors
Passive-Aggressive	Indirectly expresses negativity Shies away from confrontation Outwardly accommodating Uncooperative in an underhanded way	Resolve hostility Do not argue Build up their low self-esteem
Emotionally Disconnected	Poor communication Unable to motivate others Hard to read Mechanical, Indifferent	Build trust

Bad Boss versus Good Boss

"A boss creates fear, a leader confidence. A boss fixes blame, a leader corrects mistakes. A boss knows all, a leader asks questions. A boss makes work drudgery, a leader makes it interesting." (Russell Ewing - British Journalist). Obviously, the good boss is often viewed as a leader. They inspire, guide, listen and speak in terms of "we" or the "team." The bad boss depends on authority, orders people around and speaks in terms of "I."

People thrive when they have a purpose, are respected, are part of a great team and when their efforts are acknowledged. People decide to quit when the work environment becomes difficult - and when people leave the veterinary practice due to a bad boss, they take their valuable skills and knowledge with them – often to a competitor.

The business can take action when faced with a bad boss situation – better yet; the business can take action when a person is initially promoted to a coordinator/manager/boss position. Train them to:

- value the team,
- provide clear direction,
- communicate effectively,
- be empathetic and aware of their actions,
- empower team members, and
- be committed to learning and development of individual employees.

The responsibility of each of us (AKA the employee faced with a bad boss/manager/coordinator) includes a spin on managing – termed "managing up." Warrell and others list a few tips for those of us under the weight of a bad boss to follow:

- Put yourself in their shoes and try to understand their motives
- Help you boss focus on his or her strengths and success of the task at hand
- Don't fall into bad behavior yourself (gossiping, poor performance, bad attitude)
- Have the courage to have difficult conversations about your concerns (discuss in private)
- Identify and adapt communication styles to make the relationship work
- Stand up to bullying

Having a bad boss is not an end all situation. Your first response should not be to leave the job, however, it may need to be an option as you exhaust efforts to improve the work relationship. Consider this time spent with a bad boss as an opportunity for you to develop your own good boss leadership skills for those times when you are in charge of a project or promoted to a management position (Warrell). After all, you would not want to be the one causing an exodus of talented people because of your bad boss skills. Use this time spent with a bad boss as a valuable on-the-job learning experience for your personal growth – improving your skills and knowledge of what it takes to be a good boss.

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Scenario:

Head Surgery Tech – Rachel

Assistant Tech – John

Surgeon - Dr. Ben

Rachel bee-bops in to surgery and the team performs like a well-oiled machine. The next day, something strange happens. Rachel turns into a difficult person. She orders John around as if he has never worked in surgery. She criticizes Dr. Ben's suturing technique. She complains that the receptionist team has no idea how to schedule the surgery load. She even goes so far as to call one of the other techs "on the carpet" for failing to properly document pre-surgical notes on the surgery release form. Dr. Ben has had enough of her extreme mood swings and does not want her on his surgical team.

Scenario:

Exam Room – Dr. Steve

Tech Manager – Sue

Room Tech – Ellen

Dr. Steve is quietly proceeding through his appointment line up with Ellen assisting him. Afterwards, Dr. Steve approaches Sue, the tech manager, and tells her to do something with Ellen. He claims that Ellen is an incompetent, lazy excuse for a tech and that he could see more patients if he worked by himself.

Scenario:

Tech Manager – Bryce

Receptionist Manager – Grace

Associates – Dr. Lucy and Dr. Barb

During a management meeting, Dr. Barb expresses concern about the doggie messes on the front lawn during these busy summer months. She wants the techs and receptionists to help out with clean up – a duty typically given to the kennel team. Bryce and Grace nod in acknowledgement and go back to their teams to review protocol changes and conduct team training. Later that day, a client checks in and apologizes profusely about the huge mess her dog has left on the front walk. Grace assures the client this happens all the time and they will take care of it. Grace then pages for kennel to take care of the mess out front. Later, Bryce is returning from lunch and walks past the mess. He informs Grace as he enters and Grace says they have been really busy and she told kennel a long time ago to go clean it. Bryce reiterates the request for everyone to get involved in clean up to which Grace tells him to tell his techs in the back holding up the counter to get on it then.

Scenario:

Owners – Dr. Bill and Dr. Jane

Hospital Administrator – Rob

At their monthly owner's meeting, Rob presents some areas on the P&L statement that he is concerned about. Dr. Jane agrees and turns to Dr. Bill for his input as the primary owner of the practice. Dr. Bill shrugs his shoulders and says he guesses he could take a look at it. The next month, Dr. Bill says he forgot to "look into it" because he was really busy with extra surgeries.

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