

TITLE: Drama and the Boss – How to Deal with Toxic Bosses

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We have all worked with a difficult team member at one time or another. There was the drama queen, the whiner; the cynic ... the list goes on. One of the most difficult jobs of a manager or boss is making that person aware of their difficult behavior and how that behavior affects their fellow team members. But what if the difficult person is the boss? What if that person is your manager? The drama and difficulties take on an entirely different level of stress and concern when the difficult behavior is coming from the person in the very position whose job it is to remedy any drama.

The manager or boss is in a unique leadership role that requires they establish a positive work environment to encourage the growth of people on the team, ensure consistent, high-quality treatment of the patients, and promote business profitability. However, when this person operates from a position of difficult behavior, chaos ensues. Team members lose their sense of direction, patient care can become compromised, client service falls flat, and business success becomes unpredictable.

It is not enough simply to label a boss as the “bad boss” – it becomes, at the very least, a mission of survival and, at a higher level, a call to a purpose for coaching them towards change. Recall the old adage, “People don’t leave jobs, they leave managers”. It would be very easy to point fingers at your “bad bosses”. It would be even harder, if you were a manager, to look at your pointing finger and notice the fingers pointing back at you!

Your Challenge

Instead of repeating horror stories about bad bosses, your challenge is to examine your managers, your bosses and yourself for some of the common traits people list on various website polls (Heathfield, Jackson, et. al.). You need to ask yourself – What behaviors do I consider “bad” for bosses? Do I display any of these behaviors? If I am in the running for a promotion, will my team complain about any of these traits in me?

- Have favorite team members who ‘report’ on others (i.e. tattletale), plays favorites.
- Ignore team members - never reward, recognize or motivate others.
- Fail to plan or fail to communicate plans, do not offer any guidance.
- Intimidate or bully others.
- Unaccepting of any feedback or criticism, never admit being wrong.
- Keep ‘stirring the pot’ and causing dissension among the team.
- Inconsistent, breaks promises, hypocrite.
- Take credit for any successes and blame others for any failures.
- Micromanage everyone.
- Unable to make decisions.
- Vindictive, never forget someone’s mistake or weakness.
- Covertly undermine others, shy away from confrontation.
- Selfish, arrogant, inconsiderate, feel entitled.

As you read the list, you may have found yourself assigning names to each of the behaviors listed. Did you assign any of these traits to yourself? Bad boss behavior extends beyond the relationship with each individual employee; it reaches into client interactions, business plans, and standard operating procedures and structure of the organization (Kets de Vries).

Not only does a bad boss affect employee morale and engagement, it stunts professional growth of every member on the team and may become so embedded in the practice culture that other team members begin to demonstrate the bad behaviors themselves. Action is necessary to fix a deteriorating condition.

The Fix

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You have three options when working with a bad boss:

1. Quietly ignore the behavior OR spend time complaining to others
2. Quite the job – leave the bad boss behind
3. Try to fix the work relationship – manage up

Managing up is the most intensive choice. It means you are proactively working on the relationship in a way that benefits both you and your boss. You are learning how to communicate with and work with your boss. Before you think managing up is not worth the effort, Margie Warrell points out an important factor to consider – think of this work relationship as an opportunity. An opportunity to develop your own leadership skills by learning from the mistakes of others, and an opportunity to develop a better working relationship with the boss by learning how to work with them.

Understanding what is behind the behavior is your key to success in working with a bad boss, and for managing up and taking responsibility for your work relationship. Warrell and Mats offer up these helpful tips:

- Know what drives your boss, what motivates them.
- Learn how your boss likes to communicate (formal, informal, written, verbal, memos).
- Work with the boss's strengths, being aware of the weaknesses and working around those.
- Do not fall into the same trap by being a bad employee and exhibiting the same bad behaviors.
- Discuss concerns with your boss and offer solutions, and certainly stand up to bullying.
- Make certain to check in with your boss, build trust and not let situations sneak up on them.
- Evaluate your past performance and communications with your boss for times that may have caused tension or your current relationship issues.

While none of these tips is a quick fix, they are strength-builders for your own skills. Certainly, if your boss is involved in unethical or illegal activities, leaving the job may be your best option. In many situations, it is about learning how to work with all types of personalities – understanding yourself as well as the boss.

As much as you may hate to think this way, you are in a relationship and must take some responsibility for making it work. You can learn valuable lessons from work experiences with a bad boss – what not to do, how to communicate better, how to build trust, and even how to exit a job on good terms!

What are Good Boss Behaviors?

With all the focus being on bad boss behaviors perhaps a little time spent on identifying good boss behaviors is warranted. Consider how you can develop these good boss behaviors in your management team and yourself:

- Consistent, predictable
- Emotional control
- Good communicator
- Develops others
- Knows the value each person brings to the business
- Flexible about how to a job done right
- Able to make decisions for the good of everyone
- Approachable, available to talk to
- Gives feedback and constructive criticism
- Respects others and makes others feel they are a valued member of the team

Read that list again. Are you able to identify good boss behaviors in members of your current management team (and yourself)? If you find that there is a current manager who cannot be placed on the good boss behavior list, would you consider coaching them or relieving them of their duties? A study by the Stanford's Graduate School of Business (Yglesias) makes a good argument for reasons to assess your managers for good boss behaviors:

- Team members learn better work methods from good bosses
- Good team members work even better when working with great bosses
- Replacing a bad boss with a good boss can increase productivity by as much as 10%

The study dispelled the notion of hanging onto bad bosses, as well as pairing poor performing employees with a good boss; opting instead for the higher engagement and productivity seen when good team members and good bosses work together. Perhaps it is time for a review of current good boss versus bad boss relationships in your practice. Your Circle of Care (Patient Care, Client Service, and Business Success) may be suffering from the effects of a bad boss in your ranks. Take action to coach your management team to better boss behaviors, remove bad bosses before they infect your entire practice culture, and realize the opportunity for improved profitability through the actions of good bosses on your Circle of Care.

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