



WORKING WITH A BAD BOSS

By Jill Hoffman

Learn how to work with bad bosses and help them become better leaders.

If you've been working for any length of time, chances are you've run into a bad boss. It might have been the micromanager who couldn't let go of the reins, or the ineffective leader who failed to define a clear vision for employees. Maybe it was the unavailable manager exhibiting insensitivity to your personal or work concerns, or the worst offender: the non-communicator who jeopardized the mission of the operation — including patient care.

The good news is there is a spectrum of bad bosses. Some are just lacking in effective leadership skills, which can be improved with proactive efforts on the part of the employee. For the boss completely unwilling to open lines of communication or who is steadfast in the status quo, it may be time to spruce up the résumé and start looking for a new job.

SPECTRUM

Leigh Steere, cofounder, Managing People Better LLC, noted less-than-stellar bosses range from mildly to very ineffective. "Somewhere in the neighborhood of 90% of managers could work on something in the 'relating' and 'requiring' department," she said.

Good managers have well-developed "requiring" and "relating" skills, Steere says. "Requiring" abilities are results-oriented (e.g., creating expectations, focusing on goals, insisting on excellence, setting appropriate controls). "Relating" behaviors are relationship-building (e.g., asking questions, listening, coaching, including employees in decision-making). "Almost all managers either underutilize or overutilize some of the relating and requiring skills in their jobs and are not as effective as they could be," Steere said.

TRAITS OF NOT-SO-BAD BOSSES

On the less egregious end of the bad boss spectrum, the micromanager falls into the "over-requiring" category of managers. This person delegates work, but constantly monitors the employees doing it. Over time, this strategy prevents nurses and health-care staff from building skills to think critically and solve problems in the workplace, and instead creates order takers.

"The nurses end up not growing in their ability to identify what needs to happen for patient care," Steere said. "They're just doing what they need to do at 10, 2 and 6 o'clock."

On the other hand, the uninvolved or distant manager, who seems unconcerned about employees' needs, may just be consumed with their own responsibilities.

"Some managers are so focused on the big-picture goals and mandates from senior leadership that they are less tuned in to the day-to-day needs or struggles of the nurses reporting to them," said Pamela Schubert-Bob, a clinical coordinator at Boston Children's Hospital and long-time nurse manager. "Effective nurse managers must balance both — the overall department goals and each employee's specific training needs and career goals."

WORKING WITH INEFFECTIVE MANAGERS

The best way for an employee to approach a micromanaging boss is to cloak the real problem of overinvolvement by saying something to the effect of: "I can see that you really care about the quality of our work, and there's something that would help me deliver better quality."

The key is to frame the conversation in a positive way so the manager is more receptive. Micromanaging bosses, in Steere's experience, don't usually recognize the depth and breadth of the problems they're creating. The person is more likely to see themselves as somebody who



cares deeply about their work.

Deborah Brown-Volkman, president of Surpass Your Dreams Inc., said that getting to know the boss may illuminate why a manager isn't effective. "Because every person — when you talk to them, no matter who they are — they tell you that they're doing the best that they can. But you don't really know what's going on with somebody else."

Her advice for remediating any difficult managerial relationship is to focus on what's good about the supervisor. "Your boss will pick up on that," she said. "You will have a better relationship. People like to be around people who like them."

EMPLOYEE MISSTEPS

One strategy that never works is complaining or gossiping about a manager to colleagues, even though it may be tempting for employees. Aside from being unprofessional, the negative chatter will undoubtedly get back to the boss in the healthcare environment where people are always walking around.

In addition, this lack of effective communication further strains relationships, creating bad feelings on the part of the employee that will eventually become apparent to the manager. Many employees mistakenly assume they can fool leaders with a false front. "Your boss knows you don't like them," Brown-Volkman said. "People know."

Schubert-Bob suggested employees talk to the manager before the situation escalates or people feel compelled to vent to other employees. "Rumors


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take a lot more of a manager's energy to work through than if somebody will simply come up and speak about what they're concerned about," she said.

Conversely, confronting or attacking the boss is another doomed idea. "Some people don't realize that you can't go up against your boss and win," Brown-Volkman said. "But people try, and they start to rebel, and they're not nice. You'll never win against your boss."

DRAWING LINES

Some ineffective managers cross lines in a way that is less obvious than, say, a verbally abusive boss. One example is the over-requiring nurse manager who, when her employee makes a mistake, doesn't encourage an open discussion about the incident, and focuses primarily on not making the mistake again. "There's no opportunity for growth there," Steere explained. "There's no opportunity for the nurse to learn what wasn't working about her decision process."

This behavior actually jeopardizes patient care and fails to support 

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nurses and other healthcare workers in their often physically, mentally and emotionally taxing jobs. It may leave an employee no choice but to inform proper channels if patient care is truly at risk and ultimately exit the job.

But even if the manager's behavior isn't that problematic, a personality conflict could devolve to the point where an employee dreads coming to work. The staff member may start lashing out at co-workers or the boss, or they "stuff" their feelings and get physically sick. "You don't want it to get to that point," Brown-Volkman said. "But sometimes people don't act until then because they're afraid."

RECOGNIZING THE SIGNS

The best way to work with a truly bad boss is to avoid getting hired by one in the first place. Pay attention in the job interview to what the manager is doing and saying, said Brown-Volkman. Most people who end up working with a poor supervisor can track problems to the first encounter. Brown-Volkman's clients have told her their future bosses weren't friendly or were rude in the interview; they may have checked email or picked up the phone. Interviewees got a "bad vibe," but rationalized that they needed the job or wanted it on their résumé.

Brown-Volkman noted individuals want to uncover troubling managerial behaviors during initial conversations because sustaining a relationship with a bad boss over time can have long-term effects on the employee: "It affects your self-esteem. It affects your self-confidence. ... It wears on you."

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