

GOOD BOSS – BAD BOSS?

Giving a talk the other evening, I asked the audience for examples of stressors. One lady shared; “My boss. He makes me sick! I’d like to kill him!” Strong words – but familiar? In this economy, perhaps not surprisingly similar exclamations are becoming more and more common in all settings where stress is discussed. Unfortunately, many bosses lack people skills and still see the business world as a cutthroat environment where the strong survive, care and consideration are soft and pointless, and emotions are merely tools with which to manipulate and control.

Even more unfortunately, that kind of attitude is not only upsetting but actually damages employees’ health. Recent studies have shown that the harmful effects of having a boss with this approach to leadership may even be cumulative – the risk goes up the longer an employee works for the same company. Conversely, if your boss has good people skills and a good understanding of emotional intelligence, employees’ health will benefit. Researcher Dr. Anna Nyberg in Stockholm found that it is particularly relevant when heart problems are concerned, *‘If you have a good boss, you have at least a 20 percent lower risk of heart problems and if you stay with your boss for four years, you have at least a 39 percent lower risk.’*

Other research shows that good bosses are first and foremost good listeners. Although effective leaders need to be assertive, they also know how to read the responses of people and make adjustments to their own behaviour to get employees to perform well in different situations, including and especially under stress. Good bosses inspire and motivate the people they lead, encourage them to give feedback, and avoid launching into arguments or becoming angry when they think someone is wrong.

Bad bosses on the other hand, give neither time nor priority to listening, and tend to be especially overbearing and inconsiderate to employees that are stressed or fatigued. Although all leaders are under more pressure now than ever, if they lack people skills the added pressure tends to exacerbate their insensitivity and pushiness; “Just get on with it!” may be one of their more typical exclamations. They will show a lack of interest

in the well-being of the people they lead and are prone to being demeaning and disrespectful. They exploit their employees' fear of losing their jobs, (employees are more afraid to lose their jobs in the current economy than before and so less likely to complain), so the 'bad boss' behaviour feeds on itself and becomes a vicious cycle. One can see why it's been coined 'The Bad Boss Syndrome'!

Although there may be as many good bosses as there are bad, it is likely that most bosses are a bit of both, 'swinging both ways' so to speak. In our current economic climate with all its demands, these bosses may make the largely unconscious choice to swing more to the 'bad side'. Economic uncertainties and other urgent pressures are seen as justifications to ignore the humane element or 'soft skills' and to prioritise company ambition and their own insatiability over the needs of their employees – supporting the research that shows that when people get power, they increase the amount of time spent thinking about their own needs and decrease time spent thinking about others. Interestingly however, if leaders succumb to such 'bad boss behaviour' now, studies (and common sense) show that the people they lead will be less likely to follow them when times are good - and now we know they will be more likely to become sick in the meantime! All of which will of course impact the bottom line. - And at the end of the day, it is about the bottom-line; so leaders who do recognize the high value of emotionally intelligent leadership (predominantly 'people skills') know the very real impact on profit.

WHAT TO DO?

If you work for someone who suffers from 'bad boss syndrome', ideally you might want to consider switching jobs. If however, such a step is unrealistic, and assuming you have done all you can in communicating with HR, these tips might help:

1. As soon as you notice any thoughts that lead to stress, resentment or frustration, or any tension in your body, take a mental time-out. No matter where you are, exhale before you do or say anything else. Then take a deep breath and exhale again, shifting your attention down into your chest. Repeat. After three or four times, re-look at whatever made you tense and see

if your perspective has shifted at all. If it has, consider acting on your new perspective or insight.

2. Consider whether any one of the issues you have with your boss are such that you could talk to him/her about it. (For example, you might have a suggestion for an improvement of the work environment.) Should you decide to have a conversation, be sure you breathe and center yourself and stay emotionally managed throughout.
3. Confide in an appropriate colleague or find a mentor you can trust, to discuss your concerns with. Again, stay emotionally managed and avoid whining. It is always helpful to be able to off-load stress, express concerns and exchange insights with someone you can trust.
4. Make sure your CV is up to date and in good shape, and build your professional network outside of the organization you work with. Worst-case scenario; you may need help to find another job.

If you yourself suspect that you suffer from Bad Boss Syndrome, here are a few things you can do to help:

1. Recognize that change is needed – that you are causing stress and not being an effective leader. Get a journal and write about what you ‘observe’ about yourself, including any feedback you have received that confirms this. This can be a daunting task but is the most critical step for any change to take place.
2. Notice what you feel about it all – and start a list of all the emotions you feel throughout your day. Keep the list nearby at all times, and just observe yourself, and how your emotions drive your different actions and behaviours.
3. Practice breathing slowly (especially extending the exhale). Take a moment for three slow breaths every hour at least. Before meetings, scheduled conversations, and conference calls, take 5 minutes to breathe deeply and centre yourself – you will gain many hours in time saved because you are now emotionally managed!

4. Take ten or fifteen minutes each day and do a 'walk-about' – visiting your employees just to see how they are feeling. Again, breathe and centre yourself before doing this, ensuring you are calm and internally well-managed. Make it a personal policy to set your own agendas aside and just listen to anything people say during the walkabout. Address and consider any responses after you have returned to your desk and have time and space for a balanced perspective.

The only way to begin shifting the 'Bad Boss Syndrome', whether you ARE one or HAVE one, is to acknowledge that the condition exists and to start developing your own emotional intelligence and management – which can only contribute to some form of improvement. (Last but not least, you may consider hiring a coach to facilitate and support you.)

Jennifer Day
January 2012