

Bad bosses, good bosses, mean bosses

Do you have a boss? Perhaps you are the boss? Perhaps you're just a married man, and have an ultimate boss -- your wife.

All of us have bosses of one sort or another. Even if you run your own business, your boss winds up being your biggest customer, your publisher, your editor, or your business manager.

Sometimes, we wind up being our own bosses -- and we have to take care of ourselves, just the same way we'd take care of a "normal" boss.

I've been privileged to have a number of bosses over the years, and some of the best bosses a man could ever ask for (including my wife).

But not everyone is as lucky as I am -- many people cower at the sight of their boss, while others have employers who remind you of the multiple-personality section of the local psych ward.

There are many different types of bosses, but let's look at a few of the more common. You can see the bad and good in each example -- just as you can see the bad and good in yourself.

DIFFICULT BOSSES

1. The screamer

We all know one or two screamers. They may not be our employers; often they're our co-workers. The screamer has three modes: Loud, louder, and "I've got to go to the hospital -- my eardrum has ruptured."

Screamers seem to feel they will get their way if they raise their voice to unconscionable levels. You see screamers while stopped at traffic lights -- they're yelling at the person in the next car, yelling at the pedestrians, yelling at their wife, or (and this is the most useless) yelling at the traffic light.

Screamers seem to think that the higher the volume, the higher the commitment. Oddly enough, just the reverse is true. Screamers generally start screaming louder and louder as they get older -- mainly because people tune them out, leave them behind, file harassment suits, and restraining orders. Screamers interpret all of these actions as evidence that they're not being heard.

A barking dog may not bite, but Screamers can demoralize an office, as long as they scream

Almost all of us have bad days (of course, some of us don't -- a cartoon from last week shows a man greeting "death" at his door, and saying to his wife "Good news, honey...it looks like I won't have to deal with the commute to work today" -- it's captioned "The Eternal Optimist"), but that doesn't mean we have to scream all of the time.

Screamers sometimes wind up as the boss, for two main reasons -- they often have a great deal of drive, and some clueless hiring managers sometimes interpret screaming as evidence of managerial skills.

What's the best defense for a Screamer? Screamers often just want two things: they want to know that they're being heard, and they want recognition.

Often when a Screamer gets feedback from his/her employees, showing that he/she is being heard, and gains a little bit of recognition, they calm right down -- at least for the short term.

Screamers have one major trait -- they "elevate" quickly. Things go from good to bad almost instantaneously. Like many bosses, screamers see other people as either "for them" or "against them." You're either their friend, or the enemy.

As an employee, your key to getting along with a screamer is to be "for them," while still preserving your independence. Learn to cultivate the Screamer's respect. Help them to see that their screaming is undermining the fabric of the office -- often they will know it already, but it's not something they can easily control. If you're really dedicated to the organization (and a bit of a glutton for punishment), offer to serve as a go-between for the Screamer, if he or she recognizes the problem. (Warning: this is not a task for the feeble. This brings to mind the old proverb "He who sits in the middle of the road gets hit by both sides.")

With a bit of guidance, a Screamer can learn to tame his or her screaming, and leverage his/her drive and desire to become a superior boss. Think of them like a baby -- they cry to get attention, because they haven't learned to communicate in a more elegant fashion.

2. The "Fearsome" boss

I don't know if you've read any of the Harry Potter books. Most people think they're books for children, and although children love them, so can adults. Anyway, reading the Potter books introduces us to the dark lord "Voldemort,"

who is Harry's nemesis throughout the books (at least so far -- we're only up to book five.

You don't have to have read the books to understand what I'm about to mention here -- you've no doubt seen many people yourself who are like this. Voldemort uses fear -- fear of pain, fear of death, fear of retribution -- to push people into doing what he wants them to do.

In many organizations, "Fearsome" bosses exist. People do what they say, just because they're afraid of them -- and the fearsome boss soon learns that this tactic works -- at least for a while.

You can easily see an organization governed by such a boss -- they have a great deal of turnover. When bosses rule by fear, they tend to lose a lot of people -- either they fire them to keep the fear quotient up, or they lose them because, ultimately, good people aren't stupid enough to keep working for a boss like that.

Mr. Fearsome always has a threat -- and to keep the fear up, he has to constantly follow through with those threats -- or undercut his employees' morale to keep them "pliable."

For many bosses, fear looks like a useful way to go. We all have a certain amount of fear in our jobs -- getting thrown out on your ear, or having your business crumble before your eyes is enough to keep most of us going -- but a constant, never-ending schedule of fear doesn't really work for long -- and actually turns against a "fearsome" boss.

Let's look at an example why this happens -- when you're subjected to loud music for a long time, you tend to adjust to it; when you're subjected to cold, or hot, you tend to adjust. Think, if you will about the initial shock when you enter a swimming pool -- as long as it's not hypothermia territory, your body soon learns to adjust to the temperature variance, but that initial "toe in the pool" is sometimes quite chilly. Take a warm bath, and your body has an initial shock from the hot water -- but soon learns to adjust to it -- as long as it's not too darn hot!

To the defeat of the fearsome boss, people who work in such an environment soon learn to discount what he says -- pretty soon, he's got to make greater threats, just to get their attention (and so on and so on).

Because of this reality, fearsome bosses escalate rapidly to "extreme bosses." Pretty soon, they're withholding money that's due the employees, threatening them several times a day, and making the place a lousy place to work.

If you're a fearsome boss, consider changing your way now. You may need to move somewhere else to do it, but it can be done.

Fearsome bosses motivate, to be sure -- but they negatively motivate. Like Pavlov with his dogs, employees soon learn to jump when the fearsome boss barks -- but unlike the dogs, employees have other options.

Pavlov, you'll remember, rang a bell when he fed his dogs. After a while, he found the dogs started to salivate when the bell was rung -- whether or not food was present.

Perhaps in Mr. Fearsome's company, hiring new employees is no big deal; perhaps employees come up to speed rapidly; perhaps turnover of 200% a year is considered "normal."

The truth is -- companies don't get ahead by hiring nasty people as bosses; they may grow in spurts, but they usually fall behind, from the cost of training and lack of vision, if nothing else. Fearsome bosses need to calm down, and choose a better path, before they burn out every employee and friend they've got.

3. The Manipulator

Manipulators are some of the most dangerous of our difficult boss types. Manipulators always have a plan -- and that plan is always secret.

Some thirty years ago, I remember reading a little British book called "A programmed guide to office warfare: Or how to stab, hack and crawl your way 'up the organization." The book was interesting to me -- of course, I was 17 at the time. Anyway, the book was filled with people who would stab you in the back, just to get a little bit ahead.

Manipulators, whether they admit it or not, usually look at people as a means to an end -- and they don't care what happens to the people they touch along the way.

Robert Ringer, in his book, "Winning through Intimidation," separated people into three types. All of the people in his somewhat cynical work tried to "get your chips." One would do it unthinkingly, one would do it openly, one would do it through subterfuge.

The Manipulator, clever though they may be, will attempt to "get your chips" through whatever way they can -- and some of them take great sport in it.

As a twenty-something person, I was probably a manipulator, for a short period of time. It was an interesting way to be -- but it had its pitfalls; people soon learn that you can't be trusted. As long as that doesn't matter to you, and if you're extremely self-centered, being a manipulator isn't a bad way to go.

Often manipulators are people who didn't get along well with others -- as kids when they brought home their report cards, the teachers gave them low marks on "Plays well with other children." Many are loners, and have learned this single approach to life -- to get someone to do what they want them to do, they have to "set them up."

After a while, the people who stay manipulators tend to lose friends, family, and spouses (when they can get them). Many of them morph into other types of bosses, some good, some bad. Those who remain are dangerous. If you work for a manipulator, watch your back; if you are one, you've already looked at this piece for additional tips -- so I'm probably not going to reach you anytime soon.

Many people, under the idea that "the best defense is a good offense," try to become manipulators themselves. Be warned that a good manipulator can easily spot you coming and identify you as a threat.

The best solution to working for a manipulator? Be open, honest, forthright. Volunteer things; don't cover up anything. Cast yourself in the best possible light, of course, but always tell the truth.

See, manipulators don't understand the truth -- it almost always confuses them. Sometimes, they'll look at it as a sign of weakness, but most often, when they recognize it, it impresses them.

4. The Bumbler

If you read "Dilbert," you're familiar with the bumbling boss -- the pointy-haired nightmare is the epitome of the bumbler. If you work for a bumbler, I've got one word of advice for you -- if you can't get out, help get your boss promoted. When bumlbers get promoted, they tend to promote people underneath them to help them out -- as long as you're that person, you're going to be on the upward track.

I know this advice sounds callous -- in fact, it sounds stupid, on the face of it. You'd be surprised how well it works. Eventually, some executive will realize that the boss is a dunce -- and he'll be on his way somewhere else -- but they've got to get to know them in order to understand that. Moving the Bumbler upstairs (or preferably to another country) is the best way to deal with a Bumbler -- unless you're a Manipulator yourself, and like to manipulate your boss.

5. The Clueless boss

Clueless bosses are different from Bumlbers. Clueless aren't dumb -- they're usually just uneducated. Clueless bosses are clueless for a number of reasons: they may have started the company, but it's gotten too big for them to understand like they used to; they may be unfamiliar with the technology involved; they may be temporarily detached for some reason (a family problem is often to blame).

Whatever the reason, Clueless bosses usually are good bosses that are temporarily off-track. The best way to deal with Clueless is to teach him or her. Bring them up to speed, a bit at a time, with status reports or publication clippings. Help them to understand the challenges the company faces; don't treat them like a Bumbler, but treat them with respect. Clueless bosses often turn around rapidly -- so rapidly it'll amaze you -- when they gain a basic understanding of the problem.

6. The Old-Schooler

Old-Schoolers think of "the way things used to be" and they dwell on it. Time marches on, but Old-Schoolers never do. If we visualize time as a highway, with all of us driving to new locations, the Old-Schooler is still stuck on the on-ramp, wondering which way to go.

If you haven't read the excellent little book "Who Moved My Cheese," I'd recommend you read it. When all is said and done, the book has been beat to death by management analysts, consultants, and Clueless bosses who just jump on whatever bandwagon seems to be going by -- but the lesson it teaches can easily help Old-Schoolers who want to change.

The lesson, for those of you who haven't read the book, is that it doesn't really matter **why** life changes -- you accept the changes, and move on.

Some twenty years ago, I was sharing a hotel room with my boss (I don't recommend it). We got to the hotel, and he gazed at the phone, which had all sorts of buttons and dials to ring the front desk, change the air conditioning, turn on the TV, and a bunch of other things. The phone was overly complicated -- and whatever nincompoop decided to design it that way should have his engineering degree fed to a shredder -- but I found it interesting. My boss, however, was an Old-Schooler, and he stared at the phone with dread on his face. "I can't believe it -- one of these days, I'm not going to be able to function," he said.

I think he was 45 years old at the time -- too young to stop functioning (I'll be 49 in a couple of weeks) But you know, that boss was so entrenched in the past, that he gradually **did** stop functioning.

Old-Schoolers **can** change; many do, but it takes some of them quite a while. Support them, but suggest a way around their problem area. Many Old-Schoolers have a great deal of information that can help your organization, as long as they don't get so bogged down in the past.

GOOD BOSSES

1. The supportive motivator

I'm so arrogant here that I'm going to mix the entire range of "good" boss types into one big one -- the supportive motivator.

Supportive motivators lead by example, not by fear. Understanding that acquiring new employees takes time and money, they train incessantly, and then provide a positive working experience so employees **want** to stay.

You can tell a supportive motivator; when employees leave, for whatever reason, they talk for years about their prior employer. They aren't milquetoast bosses. They're often some of the most dynamic people you'll ever know, but often you'll find a supportive motivator who is almost laid back.

Supportive motivators can fire people -- but they fire people who harm the organization. They usually don't scream at others, unless a customer has been neglected. They are visionary -- they know where they want to go, and how to get there. They're not afraid of the trip, and they rarely look in the rear view mirror to see where they've come from, even if it was an interesting place to be.

Supportive motivators have learned that a staff works better when it is "coached," not "scared."

Supportive motivators often work this way because that's the way they are, personally -- but many times, they work this way because they've learned this one great business lesson: The Supportive Motivator is a management style that leads teams to great heights, and brings great paybacks to an organization.

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