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“My Boss is Impossible”: Facing the Challenge and Avoiding the Career Death Spiral¹

} “When leaders operate with deep, unexamined insecurity about their own identity, they create institutional settings which deprive other people of their identity.”—Parker Palmer

} “Being right is interesting but it’s often irrelevant.”—Kathleen Reardon

} “We must get close to people we think we are in opposition to, close enough to enter their model of the world.”-- Andy Bryner and Dawna Markova

Descriptors of the “good boss” generated across the globe include the following: great listener and communicator, courageous, empathic, decisive, humble, shares authority, seeks and uses critical feedback—in short, a leader. But if your boss had these traits instead of “Mad CEO disease,” you wouldn’t be reading this.

If you’ve concluded that your boss, like Dilbert’s, has no visible leadership characteristics, you are not alone. Studies reveal that almost half of employees say they would fire their boss; almost one-third believe their boss should be assessed by a psychologist. This phenomena is partially explained by the Peter principle: “In a hierarchy every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence.” Administrative roles are so demanding that there are many ways to fail, especially in managing people. And often the stresses of positions of power both magnify personality flaws and turn some strengths into weaknesses (eg, perfectionism in the lab can translate into chronic dissatisfaction and impatience with people).

Many physicians and scientists promoted into administrative roles are subspecialists or highly successful researchers with well developed technical and analytic skills. But excellence as a solo achiever may be the worst preparation for team-building responsibilities. As Daniel Goleman observes: “There is virtually no relationship between being an expert and being seen as someone people can trust with their doubts and vulnerabilities.” Finally to be mentioned here is that even though most medical schools regularly review department chairs, review committees may include buddies of the chair, plus faculty may not feel safe enough to give candid appraisals. Thus chairs who fail to nurture faculty or to build diverse teams often sail right through.

Common Profiles

When physicians and scientists say that their boss is “impossible,” their descriptions usually resemble one of these “types”:

- 1) The *narcissist* comes across as a grandiose know-it-all who doesn’t learn easily from others and is proud of it—as in “I didn’t get here by listening to people.” Moreover, they experience few psychic demands to do the “right thing”. Some narcissists are very productive, bringing the strengths of charisma, competitiveness, passion and risk-taking. But behind their arrogant front is a fragile self-esteem that requires constant external validation—so they only respect flatterers.
- 2) The *bully* is found in every scale of the social order; abusive bullies tend to flourish when there are acute power imbalances (is in earlier eras of medical education, ie, “teaching” by kicking students around). Bullies often use invalidation, for instance, labeling people (eg “you are irresponsible”) and controlling conversations by cutting people off, interrupting or sneak attacks, such as “I don’t want to upset you but...”.
- 3) The *controller* holds the reins of authority so tightly that they also hold back those under them. Controllers appear to believe “if I don’t have total control, then I have no control”; thus

¹ This article builds on “Managing Up: Achieving an Effective Partnership with your Boss”

they “need to know everything” and they frequently test for loyalty. Controllers may be particularly insecure around individuals whose expertise exceeds their own.

4) Retreating from risks and avoiding conflicts, the *fence-sitter* mismanages people and opportunities. These chronically undecided and unproductive bosses are overwhelmed by their backlogs, which they use as an excuse for continually missing deadlines and disappointing people.

These categories of dysfunction often overlap. What these types share is a lack of emotional growth and self-knowledge hidden behind a persona they have cultivated.

What's not to be done?

Let's begin with eliminating approaches that don't work:

- 1) Do you feel like a victim? Welcome to the black spiral of career death. As adults, we are largely responsible for how people treat us.
- 2) Are you overdependent on your boss? Ceding control to any one person is dangerous.
- 3) Do you obsess over interactions with your boss? Do you give this person too much rent-free space in your head? While it's not unusual for conversations with someone of greater status to elevate blood pressure, be alert to over-reactions. Are your reactions clues to some deeper problem, eg resentment of authority figures?
- 4) Are your own needs and wishes blocking your understanding of events? Try seeing your disappointments with your boss and co-workers more as reflections of competition within a large system.
- 5) Do you understand the unwritten rules of your culture? Maintaining a “purist's” stance with regard to organizational politics doesn't wash. In a meritocracy, talent and hard work might be enough to assure success. But to make a difference in competitive fields and in complex organizations, organizational savvy and political skills are critical. You can't just call “foul” when agreements aren't honored. Instead of resenting “maneuverers” and those with whom you disagree, how can you become more persuasive?
- 6) Is your dislike of your boss preventing you from learning? If so, you may be considerably narrowing your options. You might ask yourself: “What view of myself is so sacred that I prefer it over the possibility of learning something from this situation or person?”
- 7) Have you been trying to control something or someone that is not in your control? Have you accepted that you cannot control the boss's listening abilities, needs or priorities?

Regaining your Power

Restoring your sense of power and value within a relationship depends on a clear-eyed assessment. Here are questions to consider:

- * Is there anything you could control that you are not, eg your approach to communicating and how you deal with challenges to your ideas?
- * Is the boss's disruptive or nonproductive behavior a result of some stressor that could be temporary, eg if she felt more valued or secure in her relationship with *her* boss? If the boss's poor behavior seems to stem from a deeper limitation or character flaw, are others as affected by the problem as you are? If every interaction raises your blood pressure, might the problem be a clash between your idiosyncracies?
- * What is the story you are telling yourself about the situation with your boss? Are you flexible enough to consider multiple interpretations of events and processes? Often our tendency to defend ourselves plus encrusted resentments mean we don't see the bias in our own stories and then we miss new data and possibilities. Like putting on different glasses, try seeing your boss in a new light [eg, instead of labeling her a bully, perhaps she views herself as a protector of the organization or of a principle].

Whenever there are differences to resolve, remember that you have only some of the relevant information and that most people are trying to act with integrity given their situations.

Your Next Interactions

Now let's consider strategies that might improve interactions with your boss.

*Focus on your joint interests [eg, the department's mission] and give examples of why it's in your boss's interests to come to an agreement with you. If you add a great deal of value to the department, you have more power than you might realize. How can you most effectively articulate what you contribute?

*Explain your reasoning and intent and ask for theirs [eg "can you walk me through how you came to that conclusion?"]

*Listen without passing reflexive judgments or prematurely going into action mode. Stay centered by keeping your body relaxed and your breathing deep and even. Don't be afraid of silences.

*If you need a face-saving or neutral rejoinder, try: "I hear what your'e saying" or "You've given me something to think about" or "I didn't realize you saw it that way."

*Rather than directly disputing a statement, use questions to point out problems, eg "can you give an example that applies specifically to my situation?" or "can you describe how this would work?" or "may I point out a potential problem I see?—I'd like to describe it and get your reaction."

Specifically with regard to the above profiles:

**Narcissists* admire foresight and systems thinking, so demonstrate skills in these areas.

*Stand up to a *bully*. Practice until what you want to say until it comes naturally, then gather up your courage and speak with the strength of your convictions. For instance, you may need to describe why the boss's decision is inappropriate for you and what would make more sense for both of you and the department. If it feels unsafe to respectfully push back in this way, what does this tell you about your possibilities in this relationship?

*Can you use the energy that drives your *controlling* boss to release the reins a bit? Can you demonstrate to her how sharing more responsibilities would be in her interests and why she can trust you? If so, also negotiate your level of authority to make decisions.

*While you can't turn an apprehensive *fence-sitter* into a competent risk-taker, you may be able to convince him that empowering you will benefit the department. Accommodate the boss's preferences for lots of information, while boiling down the pros and cons of each option.

If the impasse with your boss involves an ethical breach or a clear lack of professionalism, consider taking this up with the Ombudsperson [if your institution has one] or the Dean of Faculty Affairs. The latter can also be a resource on interpreting policies and practices relative to promotions. Other decanal staff can offer guidance with issues with space and research grants. You will more easily gain their assistance if you present as balanced a view as possible of your situation.

Conclusion

Building an effective partnership with any boss can be a challenge; mutual dependency can bring out the worst in both parties. And the more entrepreneurial and intrinsically motivated you are, the harder is to cope with incompetence in a boss.

Even though passivity in the face of dissatisfaction is self-defeating, avoidance of "boss problems" is epidemic. What can you do differently? What is the courageous conversation you need to have? How can you be expanding your circle of influence and colleagues outside your department? Is it time to look for another opportunity?

Finally, when you're the boss, remember you can make life so much worse or better for your people. Explicitly invite and acknowledge their ideas and make it safe for them to give you feedback so that you can become the great boss you wish you had.

Sources and Further Reading

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