

Bullies and bureaucrats

– dealing with the boss from hell

According to Cary Cooper, a little bit of help and understanding might be all you need to cope with the boss from hell

Most of us have, at sometime in our career, worked for the boss from hell – or if we haven't we all know someone who has! I'm talking about the boss who is constantly finding fault when things go wrong – while rarely praising you when you perform well.

There are several different kinds of bosses out there – from the bully/autocrat to the bureaucrat; and those with participative and involving styles. The fact is you could end up with any of these and find yourself telling your family and friends about the “boss from hell”.

But not all bosses who fall into these categories of managerial style are likely to be “hellish” or exhibit bad behaviour, so it's important to understand the underlying motives of bosses who have different managerial styles if we are to deal with them effectively.

Let's start with The Bully. This is someone who persistently demeans, devalues and harasses subordinates in a way that has negative consequences for the health and well being of individuals and the performance of the group. In a study I carried out with a colleague at Manchester University involving 5,000 employees across about 80 different organisations, individuals who had been persistently bullied reported significantly poorer mental health, lower job satisfaction, more days off due to ill health and told us that they were less productive. So the personal costs are substantial to the employee, but there are also consequences in terms of productivity and morale for the organisation.

There are two different types of bullying boss. In the most extreme and rarest form, the bully feels threatened by others and needs to put subordinates down in order to enhance their own self-esteem. It is very difficult to deal with this type of bully because of the deep-seated drivers of the behaviour – something that cannot be easily resolved or dealt with by employees. This makes it a matter for the bully's manager and, in reality, leaves employees with two choices – escalate the matter or find another job.

For most bullies however, behaviour is driven by the fact that they are so overloaded that they can't handle their workload. This frustrates them and, often lacking the skills to cope, they take it out on their subordinates. There can be several underlying causes of this kind of behaviour. The bullying boss may not be able to handle the pressure inherent in



their job; they may be unable (or unwilling) to delegate to others; or they may habitually blame others when things go wrong, rather than thinking about their own behaviour. Another explanation is that the bully is simply in the wrong job.

Unlike the “low self-esteem” bully the “overloaded” bully can be helped – it's possible for such managers to develop better skills in this area with the right help and support from the organisation.

Just as importantly, though, employees can improve the way that they manage upwards by being more aware during periods of overload. If employees understand a bit more about the triggers, they can become a source of support rather than contributing to their boss's stress and bad behaviour.

Another type of difficult boss that abounds in both the public and private sectors is The Bureaucrat. You might recognise the characteristics – needing to be in control, demanding clear structures, systems, processes and norms. Bureaucrats are rarely abusive – in fact, they are often very

pleasant and reasonable people – but they want things done by the book and in their way. Working for them can often feel inflexible and it can be difficult for employees to act with any significant degree of autonomy. “It's my way or the highway” can be difficult to deal with for people with lots of ideas and drive.

The best way to handle the bureaucratic boss is to develop a good knowledge of two things. First, get to know the rules and regulations of your organisation – that way, if you want to make substantial changes to existing practice you can couch them in a way that is consistent with these norms. Second, get to know what is important to your boss, what objectives they focusing on at the moment and what drives their behaviour. Once you know these things it is much easier to present your own ideas in a way that will not jar with your boss's needs and you can start to help them to work out how to rationalise new ideas so that they fit inside existing rules and structures. You may even be able to convince your boss that it was their idea in the first place.

In an ideal world, we'd all have a supremely effective boss who is open to new ideas, uses praise orientated management style, is innovative in finding solutions outside the constraints of the corporate box and truly listens to our ideas. But it isn't an ideal world and we have to remember that our bosses are usually under at least as much pressure and have a workload that is at least as heavy as our own. There is no excuse for bullying behaviour or poor management driven by personal needs ahead of what's best for the organisation. However, next time you're on the end of bad management behaviour, stop for a moment and try to see things from your boss's perspective. Think about your own behaviour and what would be most likely to get things back on track for the organisation. Consider how you would have behaved differently if you were your boss and file that learning away – after all, you may be in your boss's shoes one day.

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