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Ron Ashkenas' blog post on Forbes
October 29, 2014



How to Survive a Bad Boss

A good boss provides encouragement, development, mentoring, and support, while also being fair, constructively critical, and helpful in integrating employees into high-performing teams. This is a boss you remember for years, one who has a lasting impact on your career.

But what happens when you end up with a really bad boss – someone who not only lacks these positive characteristics, but is also a negative force? Do you just grin and bear it, complain to higher authorities, look for an escape route, or do something else? Here are two quick (disguised) examples:

- Sheila was an up-and-coming manager at a well-known manufacturing company. Several years ago, she was asked to build and run a small team that would invest in start-ups aimed at bringing new technology into the company's supply chain. Since this was a minor operation, Sheila's supervisor, the head of Supply Chain, paid her very little attention. Eventually, her team built a portfolio that caught the interest of the CFO and the CEO, and soon she was meeting regularly with them. Unfortunately, Sheila's success with the C-suite was met with jealousy and anxiety from her boss. For the next year, the boss turned down requests for more resources, gave her poor performance reviews, and spread the word that Sheila was "difficult to manage." Eventually he moved the team away from Sheila and left her as an individual contributor.
- Howard was a high-potential manager at a large life sciences firm. For the past two years he had led a well-regarded team of analysts who provided performance reports to business units. When a new head of Financial Planning and Analysis was brought in from the outside, however, Howard suddenly couldn't do anything right. His new boss criticized the way things were done, belittled members of Howard's team, created discord with the business unit heads (their clients), and refused to listen to anyone's input. And when Howard tried to spend time with this boss and develop a more personal relationship, he was castigated for being "high maintenance" and someone who "needs reassurance" to do his job.

Obviously both of these cases are somewhat extreme (although I have many similar ones to draw upon). But they do illustrate how a bad boss syndrome leaves subordinates feeling trapped and intimidated, with nowhere to go. If Sheila or Howard complain to the next highest level, it could make things worse and reinforce the claim



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that she or he is “difficult to manage” or “high maintenance.” If they go to HR or an executive with their concerns, they could be branded as troublemakers or difficult subordinates. But if they do nothing, they will be miserable and lose the respect of their direct reports. It’s a tough dilemma.

Luckily, there are a couple of alternatives. They come with no guarantees, but they may be worth considering.

The first is to wait it out. Bad bosses can be like bullies who eventually get tired of harassing people, particularly once they realize that it won’t get them anywhere. The key is to keep doing a good job, while making sure that people above and beyond your level know that you are still performing. Most of the time, a boss’s bad behavior is visible to others, so hanging in there, without complaining, will be viewed positively. And over time, a bad boss may even self-destruct and lose credibility. In fact, that’s what happened to Howard’s boss, who was eventually marginalized by his own peers. Howard ended up with a bigger job in a different part of the organization.

The second alternative is to seek other options, both inside and out. Use the situation as an opportunity to reassess your career, your work-life priorities, and how you define success. When there are no catalytic situations forcing us to think about our trajectories, we stick to a certain path because it’s comfortable – even though it may not be optimal. Having a bad boss can force you to think about what you really want. In Sheila’s case, the turmoil that her boss generated pushed her to think about getting into the start-up sphere, using the contacts she had built over the years. In the long run, the bad boss liberated her to pursue another direction.

Nobody likes having a bad boss. But if you do have one, there are ways to survive.

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