

Bad Boss? How to recognise and stop the rot

By Lyndsay Swinton

Spotting and stopping a bad boss from spoiling precious human resources is an ongoing challenge. You need a multi-pronged attack to stop the rot before stress, attrition, and reduced productivity are the norm.

The 'bad apple' manager has many guises, some easier to recognise than others. Blandness, inability to make decisions, and abdication of responsibility are equally challenging management behaviours as the more obvious bullying, political spin doctoring or control freakery.

Bad bosses are bad for the health

At a human level, bad management increases stress and anxiety, and for some it can become so acute that it prevents them from attending work. Estimates from the 2007/08 UK Labour Force Study (LFS) indicate that self reported work related stress, depression or anxiety accounted for 13.5 million lost working days. Absence from work has a direct financial impact, lowers productivity and increases workload for remaining staff.

In the UK at least, there is a strong business case for effective Human Resources policies and practices to reduce work related stress. A 2007 UK Psychosocial Working Conditions survey indicated that almost 14% of all working individuals thought their job was very or extremely stressful.

And the survey says...?

American Express's UK call centre takes the health and wealth of their people seriously. A quarterly Team Climate Survey feeds into the Annual Employee Survey, and the results are included on each and every manager's goals, all the way to the top. The message is simple – how you treat your team is reflected in your appraisal, so you'd better get it right. Many companies may be put-off by the administrative burden of surveying staff, but what is the cost of doing nothing?

How to stop the bad boss rot from spreading?

What do you do with your bad apple once you've found them? There are the usual suspects' of tools at your disposal. Disciplinary procedures may be one approach, although this may be unnecessarily lengthy and heavy handed if the rot is actually a surface blemish.

Training is another usual suspect, as any related management skills or experience gaps need to be filled. There is an overwhelming abundance of choices of course and method of delivery, so what training do you give to whom, and when? And how do you know if it's worked? Back to those objective measures...

Leadership feedback processes including 360 degree feedback, further highlight weak management. Clearly defined leadership behaviours allow employees to objectively rate their manager, and provide a common language for describing what acceptable and non acceptable behaviour is.

Great person, bad boss

The key for improving the working relationship is to separate the behaviour from the person. It is possible to be a great person and a bad boss, and keeping that contradiction at the core of any intervention will increase the likelihood of success. There are a few simple questions which can determine which approach to take. Is the behaviour temporary or ongoing? Is the behaviour with an individual or with the world at large? Is the behaviour related to one type of task or with many tasks?

Temporary or Ongoing?

If the behaviour is temporary, then a discreet discussion may be all that's required. If it's ongoing, what incentives, tools and support exist for managers who make the effort to address poor behaviour?

Specific or Global?

If the conflict exists between an individual and the manager, then some arbitration may increase mutual understanding and prevent future clashes. If the problem is widespread, then assess the manager's skill and will and close any gaps, indeed are they in the wrong job?

If there is a task specific problem, the manager may be covering up their lack of skill or experience by bad behaviour, so maybe it's time for some specific training. Again,

if there are widespread problems with many tasks, it may be that the role no longer suits the person and they'd be better off in another role.

Stop the rot before it starts

How about stopping the rot before it starts? 'Poka-yoke' is a Japanese term common in the manufacturing industry and means 'fool-proofing', designing your processes such that it's impossible to make a mistake which carries on down the production process. Does your recruitment process bear up to such scrutiny? Do the bad apples get in easily or is it the company culture turning them bad?

By the books or by the scruff of the neck?

The 'by the books' approach to resolving performance management issues can be frustrating and open to abuse. Surf the net and you'll find forums advising members on how to find loopholes in disciplinary procedures or industrial tribunals, so the 'guilty as charged' can 'get off' on technicalities. This can be disempowering for managers dealing with performance issues, and the HR role here is crucial in negotiating the legal minefield.

Spotting and stopping the bad boss from rotting your company will keep HR specialists and managers busy for years to come. Solutions range from stopping the people getting on your payroll, measuring and targeting those who do, and successfully waving goodbye to those who won't or can't improve. Whether you rid your bad boss by the books or by the scruff of the neck, your business will thank you.

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