The Blake Group

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Bad Boss vs. Good Boss: What is the difference and what difference does it make?

It Can Mean Lowering Productivity, Morale, Employee Commitment

Once viewed as a touchy-feely topic leadership development is now seen as a business tool that gives companies a competitive advantage.

We know that talented people don't leave organizations - they leave bosses. That is why employers want managers to engage, motivate, and inspire workers. In fact, the most common reason people quit their jobs is that they can't get along with their manager.

The Gallup survey of over a million employees has found that if a company is losing good people, more than any other single reason; the cause is their immediate supervisor. The survey also reveals that poorly managed workgroups are an average 50 percent less productive and 44 percent less profitable than well-managed groups. So while bad and abusive managers are not necessarily doing anything illegal, their antics can hurt an employer in many other costly ways.

As our economy moves shifts, poor management becomes more destructive to an organization and yet more difficult to discern. Many supervisors still manage by breaking tasks down into component pieces done by rote and expect employees to leave their mind and life at the door.

Bad Boss and Good Boss Attributes

Bad Boss:

- They are not good communicators.
- They take credit for work that is not theirs.
- They assign blame, and yell and punish in public.
- They don't allow their subordinates to develop.
- They do not set clear, consistent goals.
- They never get close to their subordinates, believing that familiarity breeds contempt.
- They only track things that are easy to count.
- They practice "positionship" versus leadership. That is, they only care about what the people above them think.

Another common trait of the bad boss is that they don't want to be outdone. They figure that they are more important than the company and their agenda is more important than anything else (see the web site www.badbossology.com). This kind of manager causes a loss of creativity, lower morale, and lower productivity.

In contrast, great managers actually do not treat everyone the same. Instead they see everyone as unique and are willing to see and use each person's individual talents and contributions.

Good Bosses:

- They make thoughtful and methodical hiring decisions. They know the competencies for the position they're hiring for very well and how the best performers in that job work.

- They focus on outcomes as well as process and let subordinates use their own path to get there. This unleashes creative potential and innovation rather than limiting it.

- They support their subordinates and are happy when their staff succeeds; and they recognize people for their accomplishments.

Sadly, Gallup's survey shows that only one in three American workers say they are engaged in their jobs. Engagement is defined in the survey as feeling people are in a role that uses their strengths. That people are working to their full potential, and that they have a manager who cares about them.

Recognizing and Curing the Bad Manager

As organizations become flatter and less hierarchical, it is more difficult to spot the bad manager. Turnover is a big indicator of a bad boss. Reviewing exit interviews is a good way of identifying reasons for leaving if exiting employees are honest with their comments.

All turnover is disruptive. Turnover is especially harmful when it is top performers. Top performers are two to two-and-a-half times more productive than other employees. If these star performers are bailing, that costs companies a lot—in productivity, customers, and succession management.

Addressing the problem of a bad boss can be a delicate. If the problem manager is the person at the very top of the organization, it may be impossible. Sending the right message is critical. Avoiding a "witch hunt" is important in retaining managerial talent. An organization might begin with a system wide emphasis on defining the competencies for good management and rewarding excellent manager behavioral results. Private conferences to give every supervisor feedback on their management style and their impact on the critical job and business goals would be the next step. To complete this task the organization should also solicit "360-degree" feedback from everyone who works with the suspected bad manager. The key to success in flushing out bad bosses and either changing their behavior or letting them go is support from the top of the organization.

In general, internal solutions to bad supervisors should include:

- A willingness to "spend some massive time" with the bad manager;

- A complete understanding of the politics involved;

- Collecting hard data to demonstrate the impact of the poor management, such as turnover and a lack of productivity;

- Depersonalization of the feedback to make it easier for the bad manager to accept; and

- Early emphasis on ways to move things forward.

However, toxic managers tend not to take criticism well. To cure their faults, the company has to take a strong sponsorship role and facilitate behavior change with accompanying rewards and consequences. Poor managers typically require about six to twelve months to change their ways.

It is important to get to the root cause of the issue. Often what has happened is that bad bosses have been promoted out of their comfort zone. For example, yesterday a young supervisor managed two people. Today, this smart as whip, top sales person now manages 75 as a sales manager. It takes different skills, temperament and awareness.

If the newly promoted manager was a top performer using their strengths and now they are way out of their comfort zone. What is the organization willing to do?

We know that people are sometimes unhappy in supervisory roles. We need to help them know themselves and find a role where they're happy without social, political, or financial consequences.

Some of the behaviors to encourage managers to accept include:

- Becoming an active listener;
- Learning how to communicate well; and
- Accepting that they can meet their goals even if they change their tactics.

To build a leadership brand, companies follow several key principles. Above all, they're committed to the cause. Often that requires a sizeable investment of time if not money, and constant, informal coaching as well as formal training programs and annual leadership forums. These companies clearly define what they're looking for in up-and-coming leaders and generously reward those who measure up. And they recognize that leadership development must be tailored to individual companies; one size doesn't fit all.

The engine is the company's degree of commitment. Consider the statistics that came out of a CE/Hewitt leadership study: 91 percent of the top 20 companies have a process for early identification of leaders, compared with 61 percent of the overall group; 82 percent of the top companies have formal mentoring programs, compared with barely half of the firms in general; 73 percent of the best sponsor coaching relationships, compared with 41 percent of the rest. You start to see a more consistent use of best practices.

Companies that spawn leaders boast alumni who run other successful firms.

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- Personal accountability for development
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