



Good Boss, Bad Boss

How to Be the Best...and Learn from the Worst

Robert I. Sutton | Business Plus © 2010

Numerous studies around the world during the past several decades drew similar conclusions, noting that “75% of the workforce reports that their immediate supervisor is the most stressful part of their job.” Professor of management Robert I. Sutton, the best-selling author of *The No Asshole Rule*, explores how good and bad bosses affect the workplace and what distinguishes one from the other. Sutton’s research is solid and his anecdotes are amusing, though he’s short on practical suggestions about how to handle a bad boss. As you might guess from the title of his last book, Sutton indulges in salty language and profanity, so be warned. With that caveat, *getAbstract* recommends his book to anyone who has – or is – a boss.

Take-Aways

- Whether their employees love them or loathe them, bosses don’t contribute directly to the bottom line.
- Good bosses meet performance goals without damaging their workforce's humanity.
- Good bosses share credit with their employees and apologize when they err.
- “Smart bosses” answer questions and “talk well,” whereas “wise bosses” ask questions and “listen well.”
- Good managers eliminate bad seeds before they poison the environment.
- Good supervisors protect their employees from time wasters – pointless meetings, bureaucracy, interference from superiors or clients, and more.
- Bad bosses delay difficult situations or avoid them altogether.
- Bad bosses cause high turnover; their employees suffer increased rates of physical and mental illness.
- Good bosses generate greater retention and profitability.
- To become a better boss, encourage employees to point out your bad behavior.

Summary

The Negative Impact of Bad Bosses

Bad bosses, especially bullies, have a profoundly negative impact on their workplaces. In a 2007 survey of almost 8,000 US adults, 37% had experienced bullying at work. Of those respondents, 72% said they suffered abuse from their superiors. Employees with obnoxious bosses were more likely to make intentional mistakes (30% vs. 6%), call in sick when they were healthy (29% vs. 4%), and put minimal effort into their work (33% vs. 9%).

“Bosses...don’t matter as much as most of us believe.”

A boss can be bad in many ways, but whatever the permutation, ill behaved bosses make people sick. In England, researchers tracked 6,000 civil service workers for 20 years. Those with bosses who were hypercritical, poor listeners or stingy with praise experienced higher rates of angina, heart attacks and death from heart disease than those working for benevolent bosses.

“Just because you fancy yourself as fair and humane does not mean your people see it that way.”

Finnish and Swedish studies show similar results. Employees working for bad bosses frequently report feeling angry, stressed out, emotionally numb, depressed or anxious. On the flip side, employees are more satisfied and productive when they feel their bosses care about them. Organizations with good bosses enjoy healthier employees, more profitability and greater employee retention.

Balance, Determination and “Small Wins”

Good bosses are not micromanagers who stifle creativity and interrupt work flow, and they’re not lackadaisical, like bosses who fail to achieve company goals. Good bosses walk the line between stepping in when necessary and letting their employees work without interference. Good managers have determination, or “grit” – that is, “perseverance and passion toward long-term goals.” Bosses with grit regard work as a marathon, not a sprint. They sustain effort through adversity and never stop learning.

“The best bosses let the workers do their work. They protect their people from red tape, meddlesome executives, nosy visitors, unnecessary meetings, and a host of other insults, intrusions and time wasters.”

Good bosses don’t just plan to meet long-term goals. They also set out to achieve small wins along the way and to motivate staffers to reach for lofty goals. For example, some people “freak out or freeze up” when their tasks become overwhelming or too complex. People are more effective when

they conquer smaller tasks and celebrate small victories. Helping staff members stay calm and confident is one reason to break projects into manageable, contained segments.

“In businesses where a higher proportion of employees report that their immediate bosses care about them, employee satisfaction, retention and productivity are higher, and so is profitability.”

Bosses must meet certain performance goals without destroying their workforce. Partners at one law firm made, on average, almost \$1 million a year, but over time they became mean and rude, and they became exhausted by their quest to achieve enough billable hours to satisfy their boss. Like many other high-pressure leaders, this manager was oblivious to his nasty behavior and bad reputation. Bad bosses tend to have inflated views of their own abilities and performance. By contrast, great bosses strive for balance between performance and humanity.

“The best bosses don’t delay or duck difficult deeds.”

David Kelley, chairman and founder of IDEO, an innovation firm, draws a seesaw diagram with a dollar sign on one side and a heart on the other to show that firms must balance love and money. If IDEO designers work on a project they dislike that earns well, the firm later assigns them to a project they care about even if it’s less profitable.

Confidence and Control

People often undeservedly praise or condemn highly public bosses. Business observers relish stories about Apple’s Steve Jobs, former UCLA basketball coach John Wooden and CEOs of financial firms, including Richard Fuld of Lehman Brothers, Hank Greenberg of AIG and John Thain of Merrill Lynch. In reality, bosses contribute “less than 15% of the gap between good and bad organization performance” despite receiving as much as “50% of the blame or credit.”

“Grumpiness, nastiness, laziness and stupidity are remarkably contagious.”

Bosses can’t automatically create “the romance of leadership,” but they can act with confidence and take control. Many leaders lack innate self-assurance but they act poised and secure so others will follow them. To appear more confident and assertive, talk more than other people (at least in Western cultures), but don’t talk nonstop. Cross your arms to appear authoritative and stand up when you speak – especially if you’re a new boss. Caution: Don’t overdo these routines, or people will think you’re an uptight jerk.

“The best bosses balance performance and humanity, getting things done in ways that enhance rather than destroy dignity and pride.”

Good supervisors take control by being decisive. They say yes or no. They give credit to their employees. Good bosses admit when they do wrong and apologize. In 2008, CEO Michael McCain of Maple Leaf Foods publicly apologized to the Canadian people after 20 consumers died due to

bacterial poisoning after eating the company's meat. Rather than blaming anyone else, McCain declared that the company was fully culpable, and he outlined the steps it was taking to make its products safer and to prevent further tragedies.

“Smart vs. Wise Bosses”

Supervisors make hard decisions, take action and handle difficult situations. You might be a smart boss, but are you also a wise boss? Smart bosses have confidence but few doubts, while wise bosses have confidence and the humility to change their minds when necessary. Smart bosses reply to questions and “talk well,” while wise bosses pose questions and “listen well.”

“Refusal to accept blame, pointing fingers at others and wimpy language can help bosses keep their jobs for awhile, but it usually backfires in the long run.”

Wise bosses create an emotionally safe environment that encourages learning and creativity and allows employees to express themselves freely without fear of being mocked, reprimanded or fired. “Noisy complainers and troublemakers” encourage organizational growth because they question everything, so wise bosses accept them. Wise bosses also know how to fight fair. They like “good fights,” and they will listen to all ideas before shooting any down. They tell nasty individuals to be gentler, and they encourage shy people to speak up. When they reach a final decision, they ensure that any previous conflict promptly stops.

“Lousy bosses live in a fantasyland of denial and delusion. They are remarkably adept at inventing excuses for putting off gut-wrenching work.”

Creativity comes after many failed attempts to get something right. So workers need bosses who accept bad ideas and failures. Writers at the satirical, online weekly newspaper *The Onion* spend three days per week in meetings coming up with as many as 600 ideas for headlines, but only about 18 of the funniest make the final cut.

“Wise bosses like a good fight. A pile of studies show that when people fight over ideas, and do so with mutual respect, they are more productive and creative.”

Wise bosses appreciate their people. They practice an “attitude of gratitude.” Unwise bosses don't thank their employees enough or tell them how much they value them.

Eliminating the Bad Seeds

Many times, bad bosses create a hostile work environment by misallocating rewards. For example, a boss at one engineering firm changed its innovation incentive system and, instead of rewarding good new ideas, he rewarded only ideas that the firm implemented. Engineers who formerly generated about 100 ideas in during a typical one-hour brainstorming session began to come up

with only a dozen or so at each meeting. Rather than sparking creativity, the new system fostered animosity.

“Great big goals set direction and energize people, but if goals are all you’ve got, you are doomed. The path to success is paved with small wins.”

Because negative interactions are more lingering, powerful and pervasive than positive interactions, good bosses must eliminate employees who are bad seeds. Unfortunately, these problem staffers come in a variety of forms, including “deadbeats” and “downers.” The former put in little effort, while the latter are pessimistic or insecure. Deal with these individuals quickly. Retain positive team players who work well together. To avoid being saddled with egomaniacs, be wary of people who display these tendencies:

- They view their peers as competition.
- They refuse to share credit.
- They are two-faced and stab you or their co-workers in the back.
- They negotiate extra perks for themselves but never for others.
- They “forget” to invite fellow staffers to meetings or other important events.

Protecting Against Time Wasters

Another facet of being a good boss is to protect your employees from time wasters, like useless meetings, bureaucracy, interference from superiors or clients, and so on. Bad bosses use meetings to show off their power. They hold long sessions that make their employees late for other commitments, or they organize conferences late in the day, forcing workers to miss time with their family and friends.

“When people seem to be perfect, it just means you don’t know them very well.”

Other time wasters can include email, instant messaging, paperwork and micromanaging. Bonny Warner-Simi, an executive and pilot with JetBlue, didn’t like the company’s performance evaluation process, which involved a form that took two hours to fill out plus several rounds of meetings between employees and superiors. Warner-Simi and her team designed a new form that took only about 20 minutes to complete and conveyed ample information.

“You can’t be a great boss if you don’t keep your inner jerk in check.”

Sometimes it pays to ignore higher-up bad bosses and even politely disobey them. Back in the 1920s at 3M, Richard Drew spent some work time on a project he cared about rather than spending 100% of his time on his assignment, which was quality control. CEO William McKnight wanted to fire Drew but realized it would be a mistake, because Drew – as it turned out – had spent his time creating masking tape, which became 3M’s “most successful product.”

Do the Dirty Work

Managers often must make difficult decisions and convey bad news. Some of your dirty work may include firing employees, cutting pay or bonuses, and navigating mergers and acquisitions. Bad bosses avoid dealing with unpleasant situations, which doesn't help because ignoring problems will not make them disappear. By contrast, good bosses announce ill tidings with compassion and seek alternatives before delivering bad news.

In March 2009, the CEO of Boston's Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Paul Levy, tried to limit cutbacks. He announced that he wanted to protect the hospital's lowest wage earners, and his employees supported him. Staff members of higher rank offered to decline raises, work fewer hours and donate vacation time to spare their fellow workers.

Bad bosses often fire people flippantly over email and text messages or humiliate them in front of others. Good bosses fire carefully. They meet with underperformers privately before letting them go.

Make tough decisions quickly and efficiently. If you can't break the bad news yourself, recruit someone to be the "bad cop" to your "good cop." Inform employees why you need to make hard choices and how those choices affect them – not how those choices affect you. Don't disparage, bad-mouth or lie to your staff. Don't discuss confidential or sensitive information.

Taming Your Inner Tyrant

Many bosses don't start as tyrants but somehow turn into tyrants. Bad bosses damage organizations and make people sick. Some bosses are so abusive that HR executives retain their subordinates for them by issuing "combat pay."

How do you tame your inner tyrant? Let your people tell you when you behave with bad judgment. You might consider offering a bonus, such as \$20, to each person who points out how you're being a jerk. If you treat your subordinates poorly, apologize and admit your mistakes. If you work for a tyrant, leave. If you can't leave, protect yourself. Learn to care less about your toxic work environment; try to remain emotionally detached. If you must assign staffers to work with a poisonous client, charge an extra fee and give the bonus to the people who have to deal with the despot.

The Bottom Line

Self-awareness separates a good boss from a bad boss. Although any boss can act out, the best bosses understand the impact they have on their staff members. They know that employees judge them, and they work to remain aware of the effect of their speech and their actions. Your

employees are your litmus test. “Would your employees – if given the choice – ever want to work for you again?” You want the answer to be yes.

About the Author

Robert I. Sutton wrote the best-selling business books *Weird Ideas that Work*; *Hard Facts, Dangerous Half-Truths and Total Nonsense*; and *The No Asshole Rule*.



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