

Lessons From The Worst Managers...And The Best

Sometimes it takes a very bad manager to help you understand the makings of a very good one. Also, having a clear fix on the hallmarks of a bad leader can help focus your attention on the harm they can do to morale and productivity in your business — and motivate you to take corrective action.

Robert Goodell is an executive coach who helps companies and individuals make the most of their human potential. During his more than 25 years in the field, he has found that about 20% of managers are very good, another 20% are very bad and the rest fall in between. He recently asked a group of managers to describe their best and worst bosses. Goodell distilled their responses in a recent series of articles issued by WJM Associates, a New York-based executive leadership organization whose faculty he serves on. Goodell reported:

Bad managers are "preoccupied with how they are viewed by influential stakeholders" in the organization. That trait is indicated by their tendency to:

- Blame their own mistakes on others, particularly their subordinates, while also taking credit for subordinates' good work,
- Act deferentially towards superiors and demeaning towards subordinates,
- Be fearful or suspicious of change until it is embraced by superiors, and
- Embarrass or become offended easily.

Another theme: Bad managers are judgmental and disinclined to forgive. Those traits are manifested through such behaviors as:

- Making decisions with limited information and "shooting from the hip,"
- Not acknowledging improved performance on the part of employees who had performed poorly or made mistakes in the past,
- Labeling people and being close-minded about any new ways they might think about them, and
- Self-centeredness and arrogance.

A third theme of "worst boss" descriptions was that the manager simply made them very uncomfortable by:

- Exhibiting unpredictable mood swings and erratic behavior,
- Micromanaging subordinates' work, and
- Treating subordinates' mistakes "as evidence of incompetence rather than learning opportunities," and rehashing past mistakes.

A Matter of Trust

The core issue with bad managers, according to Goodell, is trust — "both in themselves, and in others with whom they interact." The lack of trust "causes most of the dysfunctional behavior reported in the study," he adds. Such managers may be hard to salvage in their role as leaders, but might be able to contribute to the company in some other capacity.

Often, such people were promoted — inappropriately — due to their high level of skill or expertise in a discipline essential to the company's success. The best move might be, if possible, returning them to a role where those strengths can be an asset to the organization. Short of that, a pair of intermediate remedial actions might help out, suggests Tim Morin, WJM Associates' CEO.

There are times when bad managers are blind to their shortcomings because "many don't know what they are doing" to offend their subordinates. The bad manager's intimidating behavior causes subordinates to be too insecure to point out where the manager is offensive. WJM's executive coaching process begins with a 360-degree feedback process — in other words, executives receive feedback from superiors, subordinates and colleagues.

Sending a Signal

While feedback alone may not lead to an abrupt change in behavior, if the behavior is rooted in deep-seated psychological traits, it can still "send the signal that this person is serious about doing something about it," Morin says. The door is then opened to looking for signs of progress towards addressing the bad behaviors.

Also, if a "bad" manager's flaws are offset by strengths, it could be that removing him or her from a leadership role would be the wrong move. A realistic assessment of the negatives can help you identify the kind of person who could be inserted in a complementary management role. For example, "if the 'bad' leader is an unforgiving rational thinker, driven by reason alone," perhaps a "feeler" could provide an essential counterweight, Morin suggests.

At a minimum, that solution would be preferable to the more typical response (especially in relatively large organizations) to dealing with bad managers who, for whatever reason, are not fired. That inadequate response, according to Goodell: Simply shuffling bad managers around "in an attempt to mitigate their negative impact, rather than acknowledging" that they should never have been promoted in the first place by taking more decisive action.

This common pattern turns the focus around to one of the key attributes of a *good* leader, Goodell says: Knowing how to assess talent and deploy it in the right place.