

Are You a Bad Boss?

By Julie Sturgeon

You clicked on this title for an ego boost. After all, you've never ignored sexual harassment charges, required FAs to clean up after your German Shepherd, asked employees to pick up a piece of chewed meat that fell from your mouth, pawed through their desk drawers, or called references to confirm an employee's gynecologist appointment — such behavior fits the Huns listed at mybossucks.com.

Brace yourself.

“Way-out bosses are found out pretty quick. When you're dishonest, or a bigot or treat people in a mean-hearted way, you don't last too long,” agrees Dr. William E. Rosenbach, a professor in Gettysburg College's department of management. But eliminating the obvious losers leaves managers like yourself under the microscope.

“Often employee ill-will doesn't stem from being a ‘bad boss.’ It's merely because you overuse the strength that got you to that office in the first place until it becomes a weakness,” points out Bill McCarthy, vice president of leadership development at LeaderSource. For instance, when the manager acts on a passionate drive for results, his spotlight can demote FAs to a spear carrier role in clients' eyes. Few professionals stick around for second helpings of humiliation.

Quietly scour your office for these signs your leadership potential is stalled, stymied or in trouble:

- **You never hear bad news.**

Kings beheaded messengers bearing bad news; bad bosses wouldn't dream of such extreme action. But if you ask for one type of behavior and attitude yet reward another, you receive the same outcome: silence. “We say we want an open door to discuss ideas but then unknowingly reward those people who steadily do their job and don't give us any guff,” Rosenbach points out.

Living in Disneyland could also signal that the troops are too scared of your temper to bring you problems, offers Gary Vikesland, the licensed psychologist and certified employee assistance professional who founded employeremployee.com. If you fall into this tyrant spin-off, employees burn through all their annual sick leave days consistently.

- **“Employees these days don’t appreciate anything you do for them.”**

Catch yourself muttering such frustrations under your breath, and chances are good your communication skills suffer. When you don’t clearly state goals and consequences, you pave the path for misunderstandings.

Rosenbach’s students see it clearly when he relates this to parenting: If you promised your teenage daughter a reward for doing good in college, does that mean you pay up at a 2.5 grade point average next semester? Or does the reward come if she’s not caught drunk at a frat party? Is the reward a new car or a set of encyclopedias?

Often, lack of communication from the boss means you subtly try to maintain your power as well, Rosenbach points out. If you immediately seek to deny that, it hit home.

- **You’re surrounded by turtles on their backs.**

When your passion for results leads you to take the reins too often, FAs eventually respond with a shrug and an easy-going, “Fine.” Then they wait for your cue to make the next move, blink during strategic planning sessions, and the distance between you grows. “Managers say they can’t count on such employees — in reality it’s probably not that you’ve hired bad people but that you aren’t engaging them at the right level,” says McCarthy.

- **No one in your branch deserves a promotion.**

When an office lacks a sense of succession — people moving into pivotal, influential roles — McCarthy blames the boss for undermining that process. Trust means allowing employees enough leeway to err without punishment. Lay on the consequences of failure too thickly, and no incentives in the world can overcome FAs’ fear of you.

According to Vikesland, managers who secretly sigh that they have an office full of morons raise an insecurity red flag — they’re too threatened by their staff’s potential to indulge in mentoring anyone toward promotion.

- **You know the details of every transaction.**

Bosses who work long hours are certainly dedicated to their profession, loyal to their supervisors, and, most likely, have their fingers in every office activity. Warning: Most of the complaints at mybosssucks.com boil down to this micromanaging. “Insisting on running every detail past your desk says you don’t trust your employees, and you take away a very motivating impetus,” Vikesland notes.

- **You’re in a new place at the right time.**

Becoming a good manager is more of a process than an event. Vikesland claims it takes a solid five years of experience to encounter and work through the typical leadership challenges. If you’re shy of your fifth anniversary, know your skills remain in development. And because companies hold different values, assume you need to fine-tune your management style any time you change addresses.

Turn-Around Tips

A bad boss is in the eye of the beholder — how you relate to individuals should vary across the office. That’s why most experts suggest you begin by requesting employee feedback, whether you carve out time for staff to fill out a formal 360-degree application or merely send around a memo. Rosenbach enjoyed eye-opening success by asking several times a year for anonymous opinions on three questions:

1. What am I doing as your boss that you’d like to see me continue or do more of?
2. What am I doing that you’d like me to stop or do less of?
3. What am I not doing that you wish I’d start doing?

If this approach doesn’t elicit a sharp picture, Vikesland recommends preparing specific questions on your management approach, then asking employees to rate each on a scale of 1 to 10. In both cases, you gain credibility just for soliciting input, Rosenbach assures.

Next, take a rock-climbing lesson. According to McCarthy, few activities teach the need to focus than hanging between the ground and sky. “In my mind’s eye, I tried to figure out every conceivable way to cling to that rock,” he says. “but at some point you have to let go to move on.”

Finally, reach out for mentoring on an ongoing basis. Attend workshops and seminars on everything from conflict resolution to discipline to

communicating effectively. Then form a managers' coalition to give air to informal discussions about new techniques you've learned, problems you encounter, and unresolved frustrations.

“When you're deeper in the organizational chain, leading never looks that tough,” McCarthy says. “But suddenly you are the old cliché of lonely at the top, so you need to develop new abilities.”

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Learning Through Discipline

Still unsure to whether you're a bad boss? Psychologist certified employee assistance professional Gary Vikesland examines how a manager disciplines his troops to uncover latent problems:

Indifferent Manager: You put off disciplining an employee for breaking the rules, which starts a rash of copycat behavior. For instance, no one shows up at the office at 9 a.m.

Micromanager: Like a man eating Lay's potato chips, you can't stop at just one write-up during a review. You start with tardiness and tack on nine other issues while you're at it.

Tyrant: In the heat of the moment, you pitch the company rules about calm verbal warnings followed by written warnings and jump right to the yelling stage.

Non-trusting Manager: You approach the discipline discussion with a sense of defeat before anyone says a word.

Authoritarian: You spell out the steps an FA must take to correct his action without soliciting her explanations or input – after all, a rule is a rule.