

The Devil Wears Scrubs

How to deal with inept bosses

By Leah R. Troiano

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If you have ever worked for an inept boss, and chances are you have, then you understand how difficult that can be. You may have felt trapped, with few options. Many people opt to leave, hoping for something better. But before you throw in the towel, there are effective ways to deal with a problematic boss.

John Baldoni, owner of Baldoni Consulting in Annapolis, Mich., leadership and communications consultant, author of six books on leadership, most recently *How Great Leaders Get Great Results*, (McGraw-Hill, 2005) says that if you are dealing with an ineffective boss, the first step is to look inward.

Before taking any other measures, perform a quick self-check and ask yourself, "Is it me, or are others having the same problem with my boss?" If the answer is not immediately clear, he suggests asking coworkers if they are experiencing the same problems. "Examine the behaviors and performance of the boss," he says, "but don't get into personality traits."

If coworkers are dealing with the same issues, then begin to document cases of poor performance. Be detailed in your documentation. Decide exactly what the ineptitude is related to, such as poor communication, delegation or supervision.

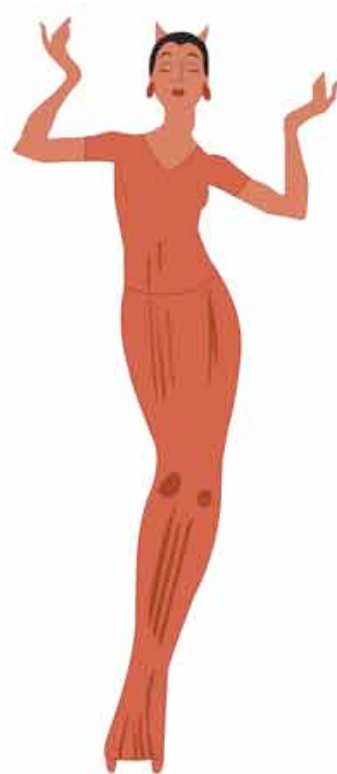
Then, list the consequences of those behaviors and ask coworkers to verify what you are seeing. "While you may choose not to report anything," he says, "you have it if you need it."

On the other hand, he adds, if the ineptitude is related to patient care, then follow established procedures for such cases. You may even have to speak confidentially to a radiologist whom you trust, says Baldoni.

Talk About It

Next, he says, if the boss is approachable, then initiate conversation. For example, admit that you are having trouble with certain aspects of the job and make suggestions to remedy those problems.

Often, he says, managers will welcome input if it's presented the right way; that means scheduling time to talk, being friendly, open, courteous and non-confrontational. "You want to position yourself as an ally of the inept boss and a pro-yourself as an ally of the inept boss and a proponent of teamwork and the organization," he says. "Be a solutions provider and someone willing to take more responsibility from



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the manager."

If discussing the situation is helpless, you may need to take your documentation to a higher authority. If that's the case, then focus only on performance, not personality. "Don't make it a 'he said, she said'," Baldoni says. If your boss is not approachable and appealing to a higher authority is not possible, it's best to find another job.

Distinguishable Traits

Rick Brenner, a consultant and trainer at Chaco Canyon Consulting, Cambridge, Mass., says he believes that ineptness comes in many flavors. The most common types of inept bosses are: the unfit, the corrupt and the inexperienced.

The Unfit

According to Brenner, "unfit bosses have temperaments that aren't suited to the job. Most bosses need a minimum level of people skills to supervise. If they don't enjoy exercising those skills, they probably won't be good managers."

He believes the best way to deal with an unfit boss is to wait it out. "Sometimes the unfit manager becomes more fit with time. They get training or discover some joy in the job. Occasionally their supervisors intervene," says Brenner. "But if the organization has a pattern of leaving unfit managers in place, think about moving on." While you wait, he says, the safest position is to keep your head down. He adds that it's not your responsibility to rectify the situations; only the boss or a supervisor can do that.

The Corrupt

"Corrupt managers use their positions for personal gain; to transfer gains to favored friends, relatives and colleagues; to settle scores, to exercise power arbitrarily; or to nudge the organization in their own preferred directions," says Brenner. "These people can be dangerous to your career, because you could find yourself accused of being enmeshed in the corruption, even if you aren't. Usually corrupt bosses are clever, and it's difficult for organizations to discover them and take action."

Brenner takes a hard line when dealing with a corrupt boss. "Don't point out ethical or legal problems to the corrupt boss – you only make yourself a target. And be careful about reporting them, too, unless you have whistle-blower protection."

Brenner is very clear about dealing with this boss: "Transfer or move to another company if you can." He adds, "If you know about the corruption and it can be proven that you know, it could have legal liability. If you get caught knowing something, it could be the end of your career."

The Inexperienced

"The nice thing about inexperienced managers is that they get experience quickly. If they learn from that experience, then it's safe to stay and wait for them to improve," says Brenner. "The temptation to offer advice can be strong; resist it. Most of the time, they don't want help. They are trying to conceal their inexperience. When you offer help, you are holding up a big mirror and they see a fool in the mirror."

The basic problem stems from your boss' boss. Someone has



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Avoiding Problem Managers

When interviewing for a job, your best defense is a good offense. All hiring supervisors give clues to their managing styles during the interviewing process. Heeding the clues and understanding whether or not you can work with that type of manager may mean the difference between reading each workday or walking through the door with a smile on your face. Here are questions to ask during an interview:

1. **What is the rate of employee turnover?**
If turnover is high, try to find out why. There could be a variety of reasons why employees are quitting and the company is in a constant hiring mode.
2. **May I speak with people in the department who are not managers?**
Non-managers will probably give you accurate information on working with the company. Ask them if they enjoy working there and what hours do they work? Do they work weekends? What is the level of training people receive?
3. **What type of training do you provide, present and future?** When speaking to the human resources department about training, ask detailed questions. Is there a dedicated training coordinator? Is there a budget for training? How long does the training last? Are employees sent to offsite classes and courses? Is there a tuition reimbursement?

promoted this person to this position, and higher authority isn't correcting it. Even if your boss is replaced, there's no guarantee you wouldn't end up with something worse.

Inept Boss Traits

Chris Ortiz, a senior lean consultant and the owner of Kaizen Assembly, Winston Salem, N.C., lists the traits of poor managers he's encountered in his career and offers ways to deal with them.

The Delegator

A delegator, says Ortiz, gives unbalanced workloads to his employees. This boss delegates work without understanding the skills of each employee. "He may believe he's managing people, but he's actually creating work imbalances within the group, which can create unnecessary overtime for some and underutilization of others," he says. A good manager understands individuals' skill sets and allocates work accordingly.

Since these managers believe they are doing a good job, the best way to deal with them is to discuss the workload issue. You can explain where the difficulties lie and then offer solutions, such as training for new skills.

The "Yes" or "No" Manager

These managers answer most questions with a quick "yes" or "no" response rather than explaining the reasoning behind the answer. Ortiz says this trait is an example of a manager who works in crisis and is unable to think farther than a few hours ahead.

"Yes" or "No" managers could be a product of a larger problem within the company, but they are unable to deal effectively with the environment.

It's difficult to work for these managers, says Ortiz. The best thing to do is ask for more direction. "Make it clear that you don't want the manager to do the work for you," he says, "just provide more direction."

Mr. No Boundaries

Managers with no boundaries have difficulty separating their personal lives from professional lives, and often bring their personal problems to work, says Ortiz. "Working for this type of manager can be very dramatic. This manager is less focused and often does not give you the attention and direction you need for success."

If you know your boss is having difficulty outside of work and those problems are affecting your work, it might be best to approach your boss if you have that type of relationship.

Try to find out what's going on and be sympathetic. During the talk, gently state that bringing personal problems into the office is affecting the way the department is run.

Crisis Manager

According to Ortiz, "If you work for a company that has crisis managers, then you can say goodbye to innovation and progression." Proactive thinking is critical to the success of any company or department. If managers are not finding ways to stop or reduce the amount of crisis affecting the department, then the department might be in a constant

4. **How often will I be expected to work overtime?** And why does overtime occur? Be honest about your views on overtime. If one of the first questions they ask is about overtime, it could be an indication that overtime is the norm.
5. **Does your company encourage a balance between work and family life?** If the answer is yes, ask how they support the balance.
6. **How will my performance be judged?** Is it based on hours, time management, project completion or interaction with colleagues? These questions will also give you clues to the manager's managerial style.
7. **If I asked your team members what they thought of you, what would they say?** Follow up with, "What would your boss say about you?" I asked this question at my current job and he replied, "Why don't you ask them?" Ortiz says that the manager's response was encouraging because he was able to get a good feel for the management techniques.
8. **Why should I come to work for you?** Try not to get caught up in titles, salaries and bonuses, because in the end, none of them will be worth the stress.

— *L.T.*

state of flux.

It's always worth approaching a boss and asking about the reactive behavior of the department. Then, offer a possible solution, such as suggesting yourself as a resource to help lessen the crisis in the department.

The Perfectionist

If the perfectionist manager does not allow for mistakes in a learning environment, learning new skills will be difficult. "Mistakes will happen," says Ortiz. "How your manager handles those mistakes is a true test of his skills."

While mistakes in the medical arena should be avoided at all costs, they will happen. Be proactive when talking with your manager, and discuss the mistake as a learning experience. Own up to the mistake, be clear that you understand your involvement in the mistake and that you will do all you can to prevent a reoccurrence of it.

The Humiliator

Humiliator managers humiliate or reprimand employees in front of others. "This is a clear and visible sign of a poor leader," says Ortiz. "If you work for a humiliator, it's time to visit human resources or look for a new job."

Humiliating employees is totally unacceptable. If the manager has an ego or control problem, there isn't much you can do but talk to that manager. If the manager turns a deaf ear to what you are saying, appeal to human resources or a superior. Every boss can make this mistake once, but it should never happen twice or more.

Fair Weather Manager

"These managers do not stand behind subordinates when they fail," says Ortiz. "There is no support from your manager, no protection from other managers, bosses or employees." When managers fail to look out for their team, the members of the teams may feel like sitting ducks.

No one wants a boss to hang them out to dry. Mistakes will happen, and the manager should be the buffer between you and upper management, says Ortiz. If the manager is not backing you, or worse, making mistakes and blaming the team, discuss what you've witnessed with your manager. If nothing changes, go to human resources or a higher authority.

The Hard Worker

Hard worker managers define employees by the number of hours worked, not by how intelligently they work. "Hard workers are defined by hours, but smart workers understand the concepts of time management and multi-tasking," says Ortiz. "Smart workers are methodical in their thinking and can generally be successful because of their ability to manage projects and time." Often, hard workers take twice as long to do the job.

If you're a smart worker being judged by your hours alone, focus on what you've accomplished in half the time of the "hourly" worker.

When to Bail

When you've given it your best shot and the situation is not

improving, says Brenner, you can always look for a new job. If you decide to move on, take time to think about your involvement in the lackluster work environment.

Your exit "could be a legitimate reaction to a bad situation. But if this is a pattern, there is a possibility the problem could be you," says Brenner. "We all own part of the trouble, but if most of the trouble is within you, then moving on to another job won't help."

— **Leah R. Troiano is senior editorial consultant of RT Image. Questions and comments can be sent to editorial@rt-image.com.**

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