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Thursday, May 7, 2009

Slow economy gives some managers excuse to bully workers

Brian J. O'Connor / Detroit News Finance Writer

The swine flu panic is over, but an epidemic of some really piggish behavior is already infecting the office, where the bad economy is turning bosses into bullies.

"A bad economy is a sadistic boss's favorite time," says Noah Blumenthal, author of "Be The Hero: Three Powerful Ways to Overcome Challenges in Work and Life."

"They know their employees are afraid to step out of line."

Advertisement The main ingredient is fear, workplace experts say. And after rounds of layoffs, unpaid furloughs and salary cuts, there's more than enough anxiety and stress to turn even a good boss or workplace bad.

"Bad bosses don't need excuses to crack down," says Rick Brenner of Chaco Canyon Consulting in Cambridge, Mass. "The main effect of economic slowdowns isn't the exaggeration of the behavior of bad bosses -- it's the increasingly bad behavior of people we considered 'good' bosses."

Workers spend nearly three hours a day worrying about the fate of their jobs, according to a March study by Lynn Taylor Consulting. That worry ratchets up at the slightest signal: When the boss closes his or her office door, Taylor found, 76 percent of workers think layoffs are a possibility.

"The boss could just be making a personal phone call, but that's a huge number. Think about how much productivity is wasted on that," said Lynn Taylor, author of "Tame Your Terrible Office Tyrant (TOT): How to Manage Childish Boss Behavior and Thrive in Your Job."

Most bad or mediocre managers, experts say, don't set out to create a vicious, cruel workplace. They're people who just aren't very good at being bosses -- and they're worried about their own jobs.

"Most bad bosses are bad by accident," Blumenthal said. "They just don't know how. In this type of economy, they are as afraid as anyone. They are petrified and lashing out."

Says Robert Sutton, an author and organizational psychologist at Stanford University: "Just putting people into power tends to make them jerks."

"They become more focused on their own needs than the needs of others and they start to think the rules don't apply to them," he said.

In some cases, intimidated employees shortchange themselves without waiting for the boss to do it to them, said Stacy Hickox, assistant professor in the School of Labor and Industrial Relations at Michigan State University.

"We see more and more people paying for classes themselves rather than having the company pay," Hickox said.

"One of things we've been hearing is that people are nervous about even taking vacation time that they're due. They're afraid that they'll come back and the employer will say, 'Obviously we don't need you around.'"

A Randstad USA study found employees not only willing to work more to impress the boss, but to socialize with their supervisor or even do personal errands to curry favor.

Instead, the best moves employees can make under such circumstances is to focus on the work at hand; make sure they're in sync with the boss's priorities; and learn how to "manage up" by dealing with the boss in a way that minimizes confrontation, focuses on objectives and prioritizes what needs to be done next.

"Polish your communication," advises Arizona consultant Marsha Petrie Sue, author of "Toxic People." "If you have a bad boss, I can guarantee that everyone on your team doesn't see that person as a bad boss, because some of them have learned how to communicate."

In the case of the worst kind of bad boss -- the abusive, manipulative tormentor -- make up your mind to leave when you can, if not for your health and career, then at least for the sake of your own personality.

"When you work around a bunch of jerks, it's very contagious," Sutton said.

When all else fails, Taylor suggests reminding yourself that the bad economy won't last forever -- and neither will most bad bosses.

"There may have been a time when nice guys finished last," Taylor said, "but today, bad managers don't get to finish."

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Coping with a bully boss

- ▶ Emotionally short-circuit the effects of a jerk by being positive and focusing on what you can control.
- ▶ Shift your focus to your personal life, perhaps taking up a new hobby or preparing for a career change.
- ▶ Focus on the short-term advantages of your job, paycheck and benefits. Detach from the more unpleasant, aggravating or insulting parts.
- ▶ If you can't plot your escape, work on your revenge. Band with coworkers and document the boss' missteps and poor behavior until you get a chance to push the bully out.

SOURCE: Detroit News research



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