



## Issue 216 - March 2021



This issue focuses on bully and bad bosses. The line between a bad boss and a bully boss can be tough to discern. It's mostly about intentions. Bad bosses often intend to do well -- and many times overrate their own effectiveness. Bully bosses are out to dominate and hurt people.

We start this issue by figuring out if you have a bully boss or just a really poor leader. When that blog and bully boss quiz was posted in February, a reader sent me this message:

"I specifically like the point that many bad bosses aren't necessarily bullies, but come out of environments that weren't positive and continue to perpetuate bad behavior....a good example would be the abuse of members that has been brought forward in the (police service) and many others. Behaviors there have been perpetuated for many years as appropriate behavior until someone sees it as inappropriate and it is called upon and addressed. Much bad behavior is learned and must be unlearned, so it's good to point out how specific work cultures perpetuate and condone 'certain kinds' of bad behavior. People learn what they see."

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- strengths-based
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  - personal development planning

Absolutely. Bullying or bad bosses are often a product of their environment or organizational culture. We've long defined culture as behaviors that are expected/rewarded or accepted/overlooked.

The reader goes on to write about her experience dealing with a poisonous environment:

"...with every effort to positively lead upwards. Unfortunately inexperienced bosses allow their 'egos' to get in the way and feel the need to control everything. It's a matter of them having to prove themselves in their position since they are less experienced, instead of having a "learning" attitude with the staff they manage. This is a tough lesson to learn with many younger people being put in management roles they are not yet ready for and don't allow their staff to help teach and support them."

Bad bosses aren't just inexperienced. Many have built up years of bad habits. She's put her finger on a competency Zenger Folkman calls Learning Agility. ZF's 360 research shows that leaders with the highest levels of learning agility make a real effort to improve based on feedback, actively look for opportunities to get feedback, quickly adapts his or her approach to other people's need or situation, and creates an atmosphere pushing self and others to exceed expected results.

We've been calling the open learning part of this culture, Moose-on-the-Table. Bully and bad bosses often create a closed culture with stifling learning loops and smothering **silence**.

An ineffective boss is often a good person doing a bad job. This issue provides some how-to steps for leading up. These underemphasized leadership skills are vital. It's too easy to feel victimized and wallow in frustration with a bad boss. Highly effective leaders don't do that. They step in and step up to fill the leadership vacuum.

What if you're "that boss?" How do you **know** how you're truly perceived? We'll look at a powerful tool to help you get that feedback.

May this issue help you to increase your learning agility.

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# Is Your Boss a Bully or Just a Really Poor Leader?



It's been very frustrating to hear of the toxic workplace created by Canada's ex-governor general, Julie Payette. Last month's independent **report** details examples of "yelling, screaming, aggressive conduct, demeaning comments and public humiliations." Forty-three of the staff members interviewed described the culture Payette created as "hostile or negative." Twenty-six people called their workplace "toxic" or "poisoned." Twelve people said Payette created a "climate/reign of fear/terror."

This public example of abusive leadership spotlights bullying bosses. It's abhorrent behavior that's still way too common. A 2017 U.S. **survey** by the Workplace Bullying Institute found 63% of participants have been bullied, witnessed bullying, or believe it happens. 40% of those bullied suffered adverse health consequences. The report concludes "these proportions are epidemic-level" and "bullying is an occupational health hazard." Nearly 2/3 of bullies were bosses.

There's often a fine line between a bad boss and a bully boss. Bad bosses are often good people doing a bad job. Bully bosses usually have complex psychological issues or badly twisted personal values. **Bullyonline** provides this definition; "Bullying is conduct that cannot be objectively justified by a reasonable code of conduct, and whose likely or actual cumulative effect is to threaten, undermine, constrain, humiliate, or harm another person or their property, reputation, self-esteem, self-confidence or ability to perform."

Sometimes people suffering abuse think it's their fault, or they brought it on themselves in some way. Rarely is that true. Bullies are often skilled manipulators. They revel in playing mind games with their victims.

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Sometimes ineffective leaders aren't bullies, but their extremely weak leadership fosters a poisonous workplace by failing to deal with conflict or not addressing toxic team members. Is your boss a bully? [Click here](#) to rate your boss's behavior and some suggested responses to handle them.

People aspire to leadership roles for a wide variety of reasons. Some bully bosses crave power and control of others to assuage their insecurities. Some bully bosses were abused by others and think that's what power positions are. And some were slowly corrupted by power to become bully bosses.

Many bully bosses dehumanize and objectify others as "human capital" or assets with skin. In his book, *The Soul of the Firm*, C. William Pollard writes, "there is a lesson for all of us in the Peanuts cartoon where Linus announces to his cranky sister, Lucy, that he is going to be a doctor. "You, a doctor?" she asks. "How can you be a doctor? You don't love mankind." Linus replied, "I do too love mankind. It's the people I can't stand."

## Leading Up: How to Lead an Ineffective Boss



Is your boss a good person who's doing a bad job? Many ineffective leaders are. If you scored your boss less than 29 points on last **week's** bully boss **quiz**, you can:

- Live with the status quo -- but don't jump on the Bitter Bus and "Cs the day" with criticizing, condemning, and complaining.
- Work around your boss and try to avoid him/her as much as possible.
- Provide strong leadership within your own team and practice upward leadership.

We've long defined leadership as an action, not a position. Strong leaders influence, connect, change, and deliver results regardless of -- sometimes in spite of -- their formal role or position. That's especially important in influencing upward to the boss and even further up the organization.

As that Chinese proverb reminds us, "don't curse the darkness; light a candle." Strong leaders don't allow themselves to be victims of a bad boss. Many people lose the "boss lottery" and end up with an ineffective leader. You may not be able to choose your boss, but you can choose how to respond. You can lead, follow, or wallow.

I've written extensively on upward leadership or leading your leader. It's one of our most popular topics. One of my *Globe & Mail* columns, **Five Ways to Deal with a Bad Boss**, provided these suggestions:

- **Strengthen your credibility and relationship** -- deliver your commitments, take initiative, look for solutions, know what keeps your boss up at night, and leverage your boss' strengths.
- **Check your timing and approach** -- tailor your approach to using facts or feelings, catch the waves of restructuring or shifting priorities, and manage the emotional climate.
- **Don't wait, initiate** -- clarify poor direction he or she might be providing, regularly check expectations and results, and frame discussions within organizational strategies.
- **Speak up** -- give (honest) positive feedback, play to his or her strengths, and provide feedback on his or her negative behavior with data or observations without assuming intent, meaning, or drawing conclusions.
- **Fire a bully boss** -- if these approaches don't work and your boss is crossing the line from bad to **bullying** leadership, don't be a victim or enabler.

Here's a summary of key points for leading up from one of the most popular articles on our website, **Bad Boss: Learn How to Manage Your Manager**:

- **Understand Why Your Boss is Bad**
  - Confusing information and communication
  - Micro-management
  - It's all they know
  - Promoted for all the wrong reasons
  - Overworked and under-trained
  - Feeble feedback
- **Boss Management Strategies**
  - See and work the big picture

- Don't wait, initiate
- Set priorities
- Support your boss
- Pick your timing
- Strengthen your credibility
- Don't be a victim

For even more practical advice, **Upward Leadership: 7 Tactics to Influence Your Boss** draws from the *Harvard Business Review* article "Getting the Boss to Buy In." Susan Ashford, professor at the University of Michigan, and James Detert, associate professor at Cornell University, report on their study of the most successful approaches to "issue selling" across a range of roles and industries.

If you've ever said, "My boss makes me sick!" you might be right. A British study found that stress-induced by a bad boss lowers immune response. It's easy to be positive when we have an optimistic, supportive, and highly effective boss. When you have a weak boss, upward leadership takes courage, skill, and Emotional Intelligence.

## Are you a Bully or Bad Boss? How do you KNOW?



We've just completed a series of blogs (in this and the February issue) on leadership **hypocrisy** and **bullying** or bad bosses. You may have completed our bully boss **quiz** (linked in the first article of this issue).

It's very easy to see bad or bullying leadership in others. It's much tougher to recognize our leadership shortfalls. As American social psychologist and

Professor of Ethical Leadership, Jonathan Haidt, says "we judge others by their behavior, but we think we have special information about ourselves--we know what we are 'really like' inside, so we can easily find ways to explain away our selfish acts and cling to the illusion that we are better than others."

Most leaders want to walk their talk. Rarely will a leader declare a value or behavioral goal and then deliberately contradict that with his or her actions. Hypocrisy is often done innocently. Many leaders have no idea that their actions are seen to be out of step with their words. And as their personal credibility gulf widens, their discordant actions raise the "snicker factor."

Less effective leaders often have deadly blind spots that cause them to become **sincere hypocrites**. They blithely become "that boss." What kind of boss are you? How do you **know**?

One of the features in working with Zenger Folkman's 360 assessment process, **The Extraordinary Leader**, allows participants to compare their leadership self-assessment with everyone else's rating of their effectiveness. Most times, less effective leaders who are "that boss" rate themselves much higher than everyone else does. They're innocently ignorant of their ineffectiveness.

That's why 360 assessments have become so widely used. But as Jack Zenger and Joe Folkman point out in their recent *Harvard Business Review* **article**, "What Makes a 360-Degree Review Successful," there's a vast difference in how 360 assessments are being used. Based on their decades of experience and research with over 100,000 360 assessments, they write, "for it to be worthwhile, the process has to be implemented in a way that engages leaders so they are compelled and motivated to become better at their job."

Your leadership self-assessment may cause you to feel you're a good boss. But as the Greek sage and philosopher, Epictetus, observed, "what concerns me is not the way things are, but rather the way people think things are." An effective 360 assessment is the only way to learn how others see you. Those perceptions are the **reality** of what kind of boss you really are.

In *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman writes,

"... people around us may tend to collude with our denial. Among the more difficult kinds of information to get in organizational life is honest, constructive feedback about how we are doing, especially about our lapses. Coworkers, subordinates, and bosses have an easier time complaining to each other out of

earshot of a person than having an honest and open talk with that person about what's wrong. There is a Faustian bargain in this collusion to act as though everything is fine when in fact it is not, for we buy the illusion of harmony and effectiveness at the cost of the truth that could open the way to genuine improvement."

An old Yiddish saying teaches, "If one or two people tell you that you're an ass, you can ignore them. But if three or four people tell you you're an ass, you might think about putting on a saddle."

## **Bridging the Distance: Reading, Leading, and Succeeding**



Leaders bring hope, optimism, and positive action. That's really tough to do while social distancing and facing an uncertain future. We multiply misery if we allow the pessimism plague to infect us as well.

To counter Headline Stress Disorder and strengthen resilience, I actively scan a list of resources for research, articles, and tips on leading ourselves and others through these turbulent times. I post those articles every day.

Let's shorten our social media distancing. Follow or connect with me:

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Together we can Learn, Laugh, Love, and Lead -- just for the L of it!



## Read *The Leader Letter* in Weekly Installments



The items in each month's issue of *The Leader Letter* are first published in my weekly **blog** during the previous month.

If you read each blog post (or issue of *The Leader Letter*) as it's published over twelve months, you'll have read the equivalent of a leadership book. And you'll pick up a few practical leadership tips that help you use time more strategically and tame your E-Beast!

## Feedback and Follow-Up

I am always delighted to hear from readers of *The Leader Letter* with feedback, reflections, suggestions, or differing points of view. Nobody is ever identified in *The Leader Letter* without his or her permission. I am also happy to explore customized, in-house adaptations (online these days) of any of my material for your team or organization. Drop me an e-mail at [jim.clemmer@clemmergroup.com](mailto:jim.clemmer@clemmergroup.com) or connect with me on **LinkedIn**, **Twitter**, **Facebook**, or my **blog**!

Let's leverage our leadership strengths to work together and get through this challenging time.



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