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A sociologist was researching the long-term effects of family violence. He interviewed two sons of an alcoholic and abusive father. Both brothers were now in their sixties. One son looked back on a life of alcoholism, violence, failed marriages, joblessness, prison terms, suicide attempts, and poverty.

The other son was a very successful professional. He had a close, loving family. He was a non-drinker who kept himself in top physical shape. In separate interviews, the researcher asked each son how they explained the direction their lives had taken. They both gave essentially the same answer, "You'd turn out this way too if you had a father like mine."

In our executive coaching work, I sometimes see a similar scenario with bosses. Many coachees have bad bosses. Yet 360 feedback ratings of their own leadership can be at opposite ends of the rating scales. The poorly rated leader is a victim of a bad boss. The highly-rated leader sees their bad boss as giving powerful lessons in what not to do.

Weak leaders often don't recognize the extent of their own Victimitis. They aspire to lead but end up demoralizing their own teams and frustrate themselves by choosing to be disempowered by their boss or others above

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them in the organization. They give away their power by believing that they don't have any. They believe that leadership only comes down from the top.

In dealing with a bad boss, you have four choices:

1. Wallow as a victim while complaining and increasing your stress.
2. Live with him or her because other parts of your work compensate for the irritation.
3. Fire your boss by moving out of that job to find another boss (or become your own).
4. Practice upward leadership.

This issue focuses on boss management. The first question is whether you have a bad boss or a bully boss. If your boss is a bully, the only managing you might be able to do is get out of that toxic situation. If you're dealing with a weak boss, it can be helpful to understand why their leadership is so poor. That can help you decide which tips or techniques you might try using.

It's easy to sail a ship when the sea is calm. It's easy to look like a brilliant investor in a bull market. And it's easier to be positive when we have an optimistic, supportive, and highly effective boss. What takes courage, skill, and Emotional Intelligence is upward leadership when you have a weak or a bad boss.

Dealing with a bad boss separates wallowing, following, and leading. The all-too-common issue of poor communications is a telling example. Wallowers will complain bitterly that their boss doesn't communicate and give them the information they need. Followers will passively wait for the information and hope their boss or senior management will get their act together. Leaders will ask questions, quietly persist, or gently insist until they get the information they need. This takes skill, this takes initiative, and this takes courage. This is leadership.

Less effective leaders often complain bitterly as they wait for their boss and others higher in the organization to act. It's easy to point a finger upward and shake our heads in disgust. It's much harder to look in the mirror at the biggest contributor to many of our leadership problems.

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Bad Boss or Bully Boss? Don't be a Victim



Surveys show that many people have been bullied by their boss or have witnessed bullying. As I wrote in **Is Your Boss a Bully or Just a Really Poor Leader?** there's often a fine line between a bad boss and a bully boss.

Bad bosses are frequently good people doing a bad job. Bully bosses usually have complex psychological issues or badly twisted personal values. Sometimes ineffective leaders aren't bullies, but their weak leadership fosters a poisonous workplace by failing to deal with conflict or not addressing toxic team members.

Dealing with a bad boss is one of our most popular topics. I've written about this big challenge many times. Is your boss a bully? My bully versus poor leader blog offered a **quiz to rate your boss's behavior** and a few suggested responses to handle them.

Given the (sad) popularity of the bad boss topic, this **quiz** went viral. We continue to have many website visitors completing it. Most people taking this quiz seem to be reporting that their boss has crossed the line from bad leader with low emotional intelligence to bullying.

The most common scores fall into the Serious Bullying category. Choosing how to deal with bullying behavior raises a few key questions:

- Will your boss grow out of this juvenile behavior?
- Is this behavior impeding your job?
- Is it affecting your mental or physical health?
- How much do you value this job?
- Should you go around your boss to HR or more senior leaders?
- Is it time to find another job inside your organization or elsewhere?

If you're dealing with bullying behavior, you should talk through your options

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with a mentor, close friend/partner, coach, or counsellor. Don't make impulsive, emotional decisions you might regret.

If you're dealing with a weak or bad boss who occasionally crosses the line to bullying, you might find some useful ideas in the summary and links of **Leading Up: How to Lead an Ineffective Boss**

A fair number of survey responses rate their boss as Extreme Bullying. 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.

This very poisonous environment is likely hurting your mental/physical health and perhaps your home/personal relationships. **Research** shows a boss this toxic might occasionally make nice, or fake nice, but is highly unlikely to change -- and more likely to get worse. No job is worth this level of abuse. Get away from this boss and get your life back. You may need to document the abuse and get legal advice.

Strong leaders don't allow themselves to be victims of a bad boss. You may have lost the "boss lottery" and, through no fault of your own, end up reporting to an ineffective manager. You may not have been able to choose your boss, but you can choose how to respond. Good leaders refuse to be a victim of their boss's weaknesses.

Why is Your Boss a Weak Leader?



Have you lost the boss lottery? Did the **boss quiz** show your boss is a poor leader?

As you decide how to lead your leader, it can be helpful to understand where

he or she is coming from. Some bad bosses are bad people. Their personal relationships are disasters, they're miserably unhappy, and their values come from the dark side, like vapors wafting from the swamp. They live to dominate and bully the people under them. And some are **socio/psychopathic**.

Most bad bosses aren't bad people. They are good people doing a bad job. Many are blithely unaware of the dead, wounded, or stressed-out bodies they leave in their wake. Just as most of us rate ourselves as above-average drivers (no one's sure who's having all the accidents), bad bosses tend to think they're good examples of effective leadership. Understanding how your well-intentioned boss has gone off the rails can help you choose the best strategy for managing him or her.

Here are common reasons good people can be bad bosses:

Confusing information with communication: When many managers hear people want increased communication, they fire off more e-mails, CC more people, or dump out more information. They don't realize their overuse of technology is causing information overload and creating barriers to real conversations and human connections.

Micro-management: Bad bosses are often micro-managers poking into every detail. This may be because their own bosses expect them to know or be answerable for everything that's going on. This often leads the boss to focus on face time or "taking care of busyness." The correlation-causation of activity-results gets muddled. It's also possible that micromanaging bosses were burned or embarrassed by someone else's past poor performance and want to ensure that never happens again.

It's all they know: Many bad bosses have had no role model other than another ineffective boss. Maybe they watched an executive bully and intimidated his or her way up the organization. Maybe they saw micro-management result in promotions. Or maybe they're now working for a bad boss and mimicking that behavior; often, bad bosses promote in their own image. So, you now work for a clone of that ineffectiveness, a level or two above your boss.

Promoted for all the wrong reasons: Organizations pay a lot of lip service to the importance of soft skills, "people are our most important resource," and other warmed-over platitudes. But only the very best organizations measure and use leadership skills as a key promotion criterion. In many cases, people are promoted for qualities like strong technical or analytical skills, loyalty, or likeability because they are good political players. And some people are

promoted for delivering short-term results, despite the damaged morale and walking wounded they've created.

Overworked and under-trained: Many managers aren't coping well with today's relentless pressure to do more with less. They feel they need to push harder to get more from everyone in their organization. They have bosses pushing them. At the same time, too few have been given training on management methods -- such as effectively mapping and managing processes based on solid data -- to work smarter, not harder. Most have not had good training and coaching in people-leadership skills to effectively lead teams and coach. Many bosses reflect their organization's mindset that training is a nice-to-do when there's time, or even a sign of weakness.

Feeble feedback: Many bad bosses don't know what they don't know because nobody tells them. At the same time, they don't really want to know what the people they lead think about how they could be more effective. Bad bosses often rate their own leadership performance very high. Tragically, they choke off communication channels and misread the lack of feedback as a sign they are doing well, because no one is telling them otherwise. And they like it just fine that way.

As you think about how you ended up with a weak boss, American organized-crime boss, John Gotti's comment may or may not apply to your situation - "if you think your boss is stupid, remember; you wouldn't have a job if he was any smarter."

Boss Leadership Tips and Techniques



"Don't curse the darkness, light a candle" is proverbial wisdom that sure applies to dealing with a weak boss. It's so easy to get on the BMW Boss

Bus -- bitch, moan, and whine -- about the boss. Or we ride the Bitter Bus into Pity City and curse the darkness of "them" -- head office, senior leaders, the board, etc. ...

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

Regardless of their position power, strong leaders develop their persuasion power. You'll rarely hear effective leaders say, "They ought to do something about that." Instead, successful leaders say, "I will do something about that."

As Geoffrey Bellman writes in his book, *Getting Things Done When You Are Not in Charge*, "You may be thinking, 'But someday I will be in charge of the committee (or agency or division or team), and I will change things!' Well, think again. That's akin to getting married with the plan to start changing your spouse immediately after the ceremony. My research says that does not work very well...it is too easy for us to attribute power to a position that we have yet to hold, or that others hold, and to diminish the power we currently have."

Here are questions to ask yourself and ways to strengthen your outward and upward leadership:

- Do you know what keeps those above you in the organization awake at night? What their key goals and priorities are? Don't wait to be told -- find out.
- Learn to leverage your organization's relationship dynamics. This involves strengthening trust, persuasion, and influence skills. Build networks and coalitions, especially if you're trying to influence significant change. Take our **Influence Index quiz** to assess your situation.
- If you're feeling overwhelmed, draw up a list of what you're working on, with time frames or the estimated effort and resources required, and set the priorities as you see them. Regularly review and adjust this list with your boss. Be especially sure to get agreement on priority ranking. When your boss comes to you with urgent new priorities, pull out your list and discuss where those fit in and what should be moved down or off your list.
- Don't ever badmouth or put down your boss to co-workers. If you need to get input from others on dealing with your boss, focus on the behavior, issues, or problems, not the person.
- Ensure your boss gets credit for successes. Look for opportunities to recognize or reinforce his or her strengths and the kind of leadership

behavior you'd like to see more of. Make a list of your boss's greatest strengths and biggest weaknesses and see if there are ways you can build upon the strengths and reduce the weaknesses.

- **Pick your timing and approach.** You may need to wait for the right opportunity to approach your boss. Is he or she more receptive at particular times of the day, in meetings or one-on-one, by conversation, or with a carefully crafted proposal? Are you approaching your boss in your own preferred style or your boss's? If your boss is analytical, do you lead with facts and analysis? If he or she is results-focused, do you focus first on results? If your boss is strong on relationships and people connections, do you focus on the human touch?
- What could you learn by watching others who have a stronger relationship with your boss?
- **Use technology effectively.** If your boss mainly communicates through electronic channels, respond in kind for routine matters. However, if he or she sends you a critical electronic message or gets into sensitive personal issues, never respond in kind. Phone or pay a visit to avoid misunderstandings and escalating emotions. You may need to follow up a phone conversation with an electronic message documenting what you discussed.
- **Strengthen your credibility.** Make sure you are acting as you say, demonstrating the leadership behavior you'd like to see from your boss. The single biggest source of your personal credibility with your boss is meeting your commitments. Make sure you do what you say you're going to do, and never over-promise or under-deliver.
- **Don't be a victim.** If you work for a truly awful boss, leading him or her is likely impossible. Your best strategy may be to minimize contact, build support networks within your organization, develop strong relationships with your boss's peers or managers, or get out of that reporting relationship.

In his book, *Leading Up: How to Lead Your Boss so You Both Win*, Michael Useem rightly points out, "Leading up requires great courage and determination.... we all carry a responsibility to do what we can when it will make a difference. Upward leadership is not a natural skill, but it can be mastered."

Don't wait for your boss or someone else to open the door. The handle is on the inside.

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!

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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 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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