

When Good People Become Bad Bosses

As soon as the word bad boss is mentioned most people start imagining pictures of a wicked person, a crook, a tyrant, a scheming backstabbing individual, a selfish ogre, etc. And typical textbook definitions of a bad boss is one who screams, threatens, intimidates, grabs credit, fires people, throttles people's necks and so on. While this could be true in some cases, it is not so in a large percentage of cases. Actually it is not necessary to be a wicked person at all to be called a bad boss. Ironically, a good natured or normal person can also fall under the category of a bad boss without exhibiting the standard boorish behaviors. Here are a few common mistakes good people do to slowly transform themselves into bad bosses.

Lack of Knowledge: A good person can become a manager of a department for various reasons, but may have no knowledge necessary to run the department. Often many employees get promoted to stratospheric levels too fast, but without the required knowledge, maturity or skills to run a bunch of diverse departments. And this is unavoidable in many cases as managers often have to swim in un-chartered waters in today's chaotic business world. However, this can become a catastrophe not only for the manager but to all his peers and team members who look towards them for guidance, help or coaching. If managers lack the required knowledge and advisory skills to coach, mentor and supervise their department they can agitate their team members to death. In addition to stressing their team members daily, managers will stress themselves more as they will be unable to lead effectively. For example, a good person can be a car service supervisor, but can never effectively manage his mechanics if he himself does not have prior experience in servicing a car, or at least a generous dose of the practical hardships of it. His lack of knowledge can often lead to conflicts as he may make unrealistic demands on his mechanics, commit to impractical requests by customers, overload his mechanics, etc. Soon it will become a ego conflict between the "Knowledgeable and the Clueless."

Avoiding learning: It is understandable that a manager cannot be expected to have an accurate knowledge from day one. To gain knowledge one must get into deep water to understand the nitty-gritties of a new department's work, irrespective of their earlier experience. And no matter which department you manage there will be some amount of new learning every day to keep abreast of latest trends and happenings related to that particular industry. But too many managers avoid doing this and don't make any effort to learn the work hands on, or at least an essential percentage of it. They never bother to understand the "Nuts and bolts" or roll up their sleeves to get involved. Instead they run their departments from a high level by viewing the world through status reports, metrics, statistical gymnastics, asking tough questions, etc., and soon become an object of ridicule. Very soon this will lead to problems like inaccurate estimation, procrastination, unable to take independent decisions, workload issues, staff shortages, endless meetings, email wars, improper budgeting, and various daily conflicts. By refusing to learn or get involved they distance themselves from understanding any practical issues and difficulties of a department. Instead of being in a position of confidently saying, "Let me show you how or this is how you do it," they will start covering their lack of knowledge through devious means as they become insecure and incompetent. Obviously that means entering into dirty waters like indulging in cheap politics, surround themselves with yes men, shoot the messenger and find scapegoats.

Unable to shield their team: Often for many managers maintaining the status of a good and diplomatic person who will not antagonize customers and clients becomes more important than being right. So they may not be able to shield their team from hostile situations, unfair accusations or demands. They will start saying yes to every demand and put their team members in trouble or excessive workloads. Also they cannot take the heat for their team when required. Very soon team members will stop going to them for help like a certain Jeff Rich, the CEO of ACS says, "I think the day that your people stop bringing their problems to you is the day you stop leading. They've either concluded that you don't care about their problems or that you cannot help them. And leaders have to be in a position to help." For example, continuing the example of a mechanic, he will often not be able to shield his mechanics from aggressive and impatient customers who pressurize them with unreasonable demands, invent faults or expect unrealistic services.

Distorted view: Customers and clients don't appreciate a plain exhibition of good nature. Just because a person is good, customers will not take things easily or dilute their demands. They need value for their money, solutions, answers, guidance, etc., for their problems. A good nature and lots of smiles cannot be used as a shield for delivering bad results. And if a person cannot provide that, he or she automatically becomes a bad manager. For example, will you go to a doctor who is very friendly, but is unable to diagnose your fever or prescribe the right medicines? Will junior surgeons depend on a friendly senior surgeon who cannot teach or oversee complicated and delicate surgeries? Would you go to a lawyer who talks well, but gives you bad legal advice? Would you go to or recommend a tax consultant who talks well, but can't give you proper tax advice? Similarly a good natured person who is unable to help customers, clients and team members can get into trouble by being branded as a bad manager as their credibility will take a nosedive.

Finally we can conclude this article with a quote from Thomas Arnold, "Real knowledge, like everything else of value, is not to be obtained easily. It must be worked for, studied for, thought for, and, more than all must be prayed for."

About the Author

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