

Nicole Kobie

Be a better leader than your bad boss

How to manage the way you'd like to be managed, rather than how you are managed...

We've all had them: the boss that makes you dread coming into the office, who undermines your work, and eventually leads to your resignation.

Jim Roper has been there. After more than a decade at a communications business, a new boss came in. Roper introduced himself as the team leader, explaining how he went about his day. "Well you don't do that anymore - you do it my way now," Roper says he was told.

That signalled the beginning of a troubled relationship, with clock-watching, inexplicably cancelled business trips, and being pulled in for sudden disciplinary meetings, accused of not meeting targets when he was in fact exceeding them.

"I really loved my clients, my colleagues and my environment, but

it was a toxic environment in the end," he says. Roper now runs his own company, Tall Penguin Media.

Roper is not alone in his experience. In the US, a study by Gallup showed that half of people have quit a job to escape a bad boss. A poll by recruitment site Monster.com suggests two thirds of workers have or have had issues with their manager.

There are also plenty of famous examples - most notably Apple's Steve Jobs - who was dubbed "one of the world's worst managers" by his own biographer Walter Isaacson, for his "brittle" behaviour.

Born or made bad?

What makes a boss bad, though? A survey by Bamboo HR of a thousand employees revealed the most toxic boss behaviours, including taking

credit for someone else's work, with 17% of respondents saying they'd quit for that very reason.

Other frustrating management issues include not trusting staff, not caring if they're overworked, and not backing them when it's time for a promotion or salary increase. Additional employee complaints relating to their managers included hiring or promoting less competent colleagues, lack of clarity on direction, focusing on weaknesses rather than strengths, and micromangement.

"I frequently ask people what makes a good boss and what makes a bad boss," says Henry Stewart, founder of online training and development company Happy.

"In my experience, what makes a bad boss is lack of trust and micromangement. You get some really bad ones who are angry and shouting, but the main thing is micromangement and blame cultures."

Amanda Augustine, careers expert for TopCV, says the best bosses are

good listeners and effective communicators who offer constructive, supportive feedback.

"Good managers want to see their employees succeed," she says, while bad bosses are poor communicators - intentionally or not - who give overly harsh, destructive feedback and refuse to offer support.

Why are there so many terrible managers? Stewart says it's a difficult question to answer, not least given there's plenty of research and advice about how to manage well.

"The role of the manager is to build confidence, ask people questions, and help them find their own solution," he says.

"But very few people realise that and most people don't get any training when they become a manager, so all they have [as guidance] is the managers they've had who were often pretty dire."

How does it happen?

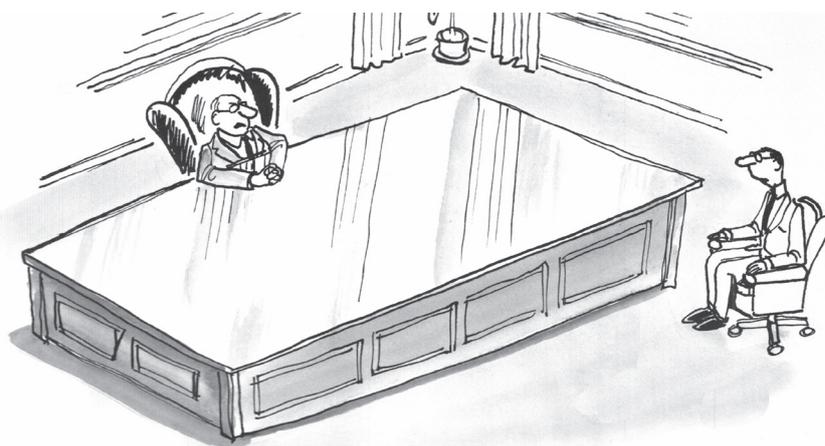
One root of the problem is how people become managers in the first place. They're often promoted out of a task-based role they excelled at into an entirely different job requiring a new skill set with little to no training. They've been dubbed accidental managers and their flaws could be costing UK businesses as much as £84 billion a year, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), in lost productivity and employee churn.

"Companies need to learn that whether you're a sales person or an accountant or fundraiser or whatever, the fact that you're good at your core job doesn't mean you're going to be good at managing people," Stewart says.

"If you're Google and find someone who's an absolutely brilliant coder, you're not going to put them in charge of somebody - partly because it's a waste of their coding and partly because they're not going to be any good at it."

Solution vs problem

If you're trapped with a troubling manager, leaving is one solution, but if you're not able to quit or shift to a different department, there are other options.



"I am always happy to review any employee issue, no matter how low level the employee and how insignificant the issue."

Augustine advises to keep perspective and "remind yourself that it's them, not you." She also suggests not stooping to their level with similar tactics, as that will only give them ammunition against you.

If it doesn't fan the flames, if possible employees should try to address the issue one-on-one with your boss with specific complaints.

"If you don't feel comfortable confronting your boss in person, you can resort to a short email after a specific incident," Augustine adds.

"Not all bosses are aware of their shortcomings and may welcome the feedback."

If that doesn't solve the issue, Augustine says you may need to turn to HR for advice or to file a complaint. "Save email threads, take screenshots of text messages, and keep a log of the instances in which your manager mistreated you," she says.

"Jot down the dates, times, locations and the names of any people who witnessed the interactions with you and your manager firsthand."

Alternative routes

Stewart suggests learning what's called upward management as this can really help the situation.

Just as a good boss should make staff feel secure, empowered and clear about their objectives, underlings can try the same tactics on their own bosses.

"You want to work out what your boss wants," he says, explaining that could include addressing their personal insecurities to improving

sales performance," Stewart says.

"Once you've worked out their key metrics, then you're much more likely to be able to work the way you want, if you can show your manager you will focus on the same thing as them."

That said, Stewart adds: "Ultimately, you may have to leave if they really are a bad boss and won't respond to any of that."

Upward management offers many additional benefits to the employee.

"It's easy to assume your manager is the finished article. It's also wrong. Like you, they are a work in progress. They're on a learning curve, and have a lot of demands on their time and attention," writes Helen Floor in an article published on peoplemanagement.co.uk.

"Master the skills of managing upwards and your work life can be a lot more rewarding, and your career prospects will improve."

Whether an employee leaves or sticks it out, they'll learn lessons about how to manage poorly - and how to be a better leader than their own bosses.

It can be difficult to manage well when you're being badly managed yourself - either currently or historically - but you have to remember how your actions affect others.

Roper is a case in point of turning an absolute negative into a real positive. He took what he experienced from his bad boss and built a better workplace at his own company.

"In a weird way, I've got some good value from that experience," he says. "I could never create a toxic environment for anyone I worked with."