



**NEWSLETTER**

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## ***BAD BOSSES: WHAT THEY CAN DO TO AN ORGANIZATION'S HEALTH***

In recent years, a good deal of literature has emerged dealing with the issue of good bosses versus bad bosses. Book titles like “*Snakes in Suits*”, “*Crazy Bosses*”, “*Good Boss, Bad Boss: How To Be The Best... And Learn From The Worst*”, “*Who’s Afraid of the Big, Bad Boss?*” and “*A Survival Guide for Working With Bad Bosses*”. Such literature often deals with extremes which can include psychopaths at one end and malfunctioning managers at the other end. The literature leaves little doubt that bad bosses can often do serious harm to an organization’s health by creating a toxic working environment.

Increasingly, especially following the great recession, surveys are indicating that a significant number of employees are having to cope with bad bosses. For example, a 2011 Canadian survey, conducted by the [Human Resources Professionals Association](#), found that 73 percent of Human Resource professionals believed that managers who bully, speak inappropriately to staff, play favourites or are disrespectful are “a significant problem in today’s workplace.”<sup>1</sup> A 2008 American survey from [Working America](#), an AFL-CIO affiliate, found that more than 50 million workers felt some pressure to stay with a bad boss because of the economic downturn. However, 35 percent of this survey’s respondents also said that their organization will tolerate just about anything from problem managers if they are meeting their overall objectives.<sup>2</sup> Nearly one-quarter of U.S. employees in a [Gallup Management Journal](#) 2008 survey said that they would fire their bosses if presented with the opportunity to do so. These are employees who for the most part felt “disengaged” from their managers.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, how one views one’s boss often depends on one’s own value system and personal, sometimes subjective perception of the individual. However, there are certain specific, more objective traits that can distinguish a bad boss from a good boss. When it comes to those with so-called “psychopathic” traits, this is a different and much more difficult matter. As Dr. Paul Babiak and Dr. Robert Hare note in their book “*Snakes in Suits*”, a psychopath’s personality can be broken down into four key factors or domains: the *interpersonal domain* describing how psychopaths present themselves to others; the *affective domain* as to what one feels and doesn’t feel emotionally; the *lifestyle domain* as to how one lives in society; and the *antisocial domain* describing one’s propensity for antisocial behaviours.<sup>4</sup> The extent to which one is psychopathic depends on how many of the various traits one displays in each of these domains. Determining this is seldom very easy in most cases, particularly where a psychopath—because of their ability to camouflage many behavioural traits—can readily manipulate both people and organizational cultures and processes. As the above authors concluded in their study, even an organization with sophisticated hiring and promotion practices will unfortunately find it challenging to defend itself against such “corporate cons”. They further note that the psychopath’s key to success is most often the organization’s lack of specific knowledge about what constitutes psychopathic manipulation and deceit within the workplace.

<sup>1</sup> *Bad managers a problem in Canadian workplaces – survey*: Derek Abma, Financial Post, January 19, 2011

<sup>2</sup> *Coping with a bad boss*: Tara Weiss, Forbes.com, July 25, 2008

<sup>3</sup> *Gallup Survey: Nearly 25 Percent of Employees Would Fire the Boss*: Garry Kranz, Workforce Management Week, February 3 - 9, 2008, Vol. 9 Issue 6

<sup>4</sup> *Snakes in Suits – When Psychopaths Go To Work*: Paul Babiak and Robert D. Hare (HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY, 2006) pp. 26-27

***“Healthier organizations mean more productive employees.”***

## The Bad Boss

*Most workers are honest, loyal, law-abiding citizens, concerned with making a living, contributing to society, and raising a family in a fair and just world. Others, though, are more selfish, concerned only about themselves with little regard for fairness and equity. Unfortunately, there are some individuals in the business world who allow the responsibilities of leadership and the perks of power to override their moral sense. A rise in the number of reports of abuse in major corporations should not be a surprise, given the increased access to unrestricted power, resources of startling proportions, and the erosion of ethical standards and values.<sup>5</sup>*

At some point in our working lives, a number of us may encounter what one might describe as a “bad boss”. Among the qualities and behaviours associated with bad bosses are the following common characteristics. Bad bosses will tend to:

- ☞ be loud, insulting, disrespectful and frequently threatening — otherwise acting like bullies;
- ☞ act unethical in their dealings with employees, clients and superiors;
- ☞ constantly put down the achievements of other people and not want others to look better than them;
- ☞ take credit for the good work of others, while blaming others for their own shortcomings;
- ☞ be clearly in over their heads from a competency standpoint, resulting in aggressive and defensive behaviours;
- ☞ want to be worshipped and consequently often surround themselves with fawning ‘yes-men’;
- ☞ micromanage activities under their responsibilities, often refusing to delegate responsibilities;
- ☞ show favouritism to certain employees without acceptable justification; and
- ☞ demonstrate an unwillingness to follow due processes and standard practices.

## The Psychopath

As noted above, psychopaths are good at ascertaining and evaluating weaknesses in both people and organizations in order to manipulate them so as to obtain their personal objectives. Although one out of every twenty-five bosses is likely to be a psychopath according to New York psychologist Paul Babiak, most people would not be able to tell them from others within their organization.<sup>6</sup> Dr. Robert Hare, professor emeritus of psychology at the University of British Columbia and president of [Darkstone Research Group](#), has noted that about one percent of the general population fit the psychopathy profile. He further notes that the degree of psychopathic behaviour would be lower in certain areas, such as a convent or a social work agency, and higher in others — such as law, politics and business.<sup>7</sup>

Based on years of in-depth research, Dr. Hare suggests that the signs of a psychopath at work include the following:<sup>8</sup>

- ☞ Gives the perfect interview, and quickly becomes everybody's favourite employee.
- ☞ Can be charming and exudes confidence and determination — but may seem too good to be true.
- ☞ Works way into a high-powered position or gets assigned important projects because he or she has associated only with people who can advance his or her career.
- ☞ Soon becomes controlling and abusive toward other employees, starts to break small rules, manipulate colleagues, and gets caught blaming others for his faults.
- ☞ It is later revealed that he or she has been destroying the management while pushing his or her way to the top.

<sup>5</sup> *Snakes in Suits – When Psychopaths Go To Work*: Paul Babiak and Robert D. Hare (HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY, 2006) Preface

<sup>6</sup> *One out of 25 bosses 'could be a psychopath'*: Cath Everett n [Managing People](#), HR Zone, 02/09/2011

<sup>7</sup> *(Psycho)path to success*: Marke Andrews, The Vancouver Sun, May 06, 2006

<sup>8</sup> Ibid:

***“Healthier organizations mean more productive employees.”***

## What do bad bosses do to an organization's health?

*The crazy boss is just one small but necessary piece of a crazy organization, which itself exists within a crazy culture that is just a part of the big crazy planet. The spore of management insanity is carried from the general economic and political environment into the business community, where it is contracted by the Big Boss himself. From there, it radiates downward to smaller bosses, and out through the organization, and then back into the business community again ...—Stanley Bing<sup>9</sup>*

Bad bosses, and in particular those with psychopathic characteristics, do undeniable and immeasurable damage to an organization. While initially such managers may in the short-term increase the bottom line by their 'strong arm' tactics, in the long-term they will negatively affect the general health of an organization. Their values will directly have a harmful impact on the organization's culture, affecting first attitudes and eventually employee behaviours. Such managers will tend to surround themselves with like-minded personnel, forcing other employees into having to adapt in order to survive within the context of these adversarial values. The danger is that some of the more productive, highly-skilled and experienced employees will seriously consider leaving the organization out of sheer frustration with poor management practices and unmerited inequitable treatment.

Bad bosses inevitably create divisions among co-workers as a consequence of their divisive management practices. Unhappy employees then result in less productive work and poorer service to clients. Bad bosses introduce elements leading to unproductive activities and practices, including:

- ☞ micro-management and introduction of control measures for everyday work or specific projects;
- ☞ unproductive meetings for the sake of having meetings;
- ☞ preferential treatment by management of like-minded and appeasing employees;
- ☞ use of performance appraisals to undermine careers of non-supportive and challenging employees;
- ☞ misinformation to senior management to deliberately cover-up employee discontent and lack of productive activity; and
- ☞ introduction of conflicting values to those espoused by the organization.

## What can organizations do to avoid having bad bosses?

First and foremost, it is a primary role of senior management to ensure that organizational values are strengthened and adhered to throughout the organization. Failure to do so invites the emergence of managers/employees with values, attitudes and behaviours detrimental to the organization's culture. Ways in which to avoid having bad bosses include a number of continuous practices, including:

### In-depth oral interviewing of new applicants

Hiring and selection methods represent the first line of defence. As one assessment standard, interviewers should try to evaluate an individual's values against those of the organization. This can often be difficult for interviewers, most notably in the case of applicants with psychopathic characteristics, because applicants can be very good at hiding their own true value system.

### Screening of applicant's résumés

*The major weakness in using a résumé as a screening device is, of course, the tendency for applicants to overstate or falsify their qualifications. It is common knowledge among executive recruiters that many of all résumés contain some form of distortion or outright lies—and these are the norm.<sup>10</sup>*

It is incumbent upon the selection committee to verify the facts, including previous employment and education credentials. Although such verification may be time consuming, failure to do so can lead to

<sup>9</sup> *Crazy Bosses*: Stanley Bing (HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY, 2007) p. 10

<sup>10</sup> *Snakes in Suits – When Psychopaths Go To Work*: Op. Cit., p. 211

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an eventual dismissal of the individual at much greater expense to the organization in terms of morale, monies and expended time. Furthermore, take the time to thoroughly check references.

### Rigorous succession planning, coaching and training

The alternative to external recruiting is internal promotion. Succession planning is one of the most important elements of any organization, providing orderly continuity of leadership by identifying and grooming leadership talent for future promotion. Such planning requires an appropriate means of continuously evaluating the competencies of employees to ensure that they have demonstrated values, soft skills, and management qualities applicable to the organization'.

Organizations increasingly have relied on employee feedback to assess the competencies and management readiness of senior personnel. Some have even incorporated 360° feedback mechanisms to not only highlight a manager's strengths, but also those areas in need of improvement. According to a 2010 poll conducted by [Right Management](#) — providing talent and career management expertise within the ManpowerGroup — an alarmingly 33 percent of employees believed that their managers were either somewhat or completely incompetent, with an additional 17 percent only marginally impressed with managerial competence.<sup>11</sup>

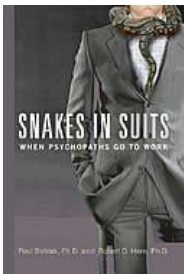
*One common challenge is that many organizations don't provide managers with coaching or support to develop the behaviours that are important for driving engagement and leading through all the changes faced regularly in today's business climate,"... "Many managers are focused on 'managing' and getting things done, with little effort on leading and empowering others to navigate organizational change. 'Managerial competence' needs to be redefined and then align the manager's development, recruitment and succession initiatives accordingly."*

— George P. Herrmann, Executive Vice President Americas for Right Management<sup>12</sup>

### Appropriate Dismissal Processes

Finally, in cases of little or no improvement, an organization will most likely have to deal with bad bosses in a timely and appropriate fashion through a fair and well-documented internal dismissal process. As much evidence of poor management practices and behaviours needs to be gathered in order to avoid or to deal with potential 'unjust dismissal' suits by dismissed employees.

### Recommended Reading:



#### **“Snakes in Suits”**

*(When psychopaths go to work.)*

by Paul Babiak and Robert D. Hare

(HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY, 2006)

### Recommended Web Sites:

- ◆ Gallop Management Journal: <http://gmj.gallup.com/home.aspx>
- ◆ Human Resources Professionals Association (HRPA): <http://www.hrpa.ca/Pages/Default.aspx>
- ◆ Darkstone Research Group: <http://www.hare.org/welcome/darkstone.html>

<sup>11</sup> *One-third of employees think their managers are incompetent.* Workplace Staff, Workplace e-News, 31 August 2010

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

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