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management tools

LEADING DESPITE YOUR BOSS

*Use these tools to be an effective leader
when faced with the challenge of
an unsupportive boss.*

By Gene C. Mage

Being an effective leader for your employees—motivating, rewarding and developing them—is a key priority for managers. But what happens when your boss needs to be reminded of that leadership credential?

Trying to motivate others when your direct supervisor is unsupportive, or, even worse, directly undermines the actions you take to lead your staff, can negatively affect your morale and the effectiveness of your team.

Typical behaviors of an unsupportive boss include lacking clear expectations, shifting goals, countermanding decisions, betraying a confidence, lacking in integrity, engaging in negative politics and micro-managing.

The good news is you can continue to lead others effectively in spite of your boss's bad behavior. It's all a matter of finding the right mindset.

As Peter Block, author, speaker and co-founder of the New School for Managing in Chapel Hill, N.C., and founding partner of the training firm Designed Learning Inc., comments, "You don't need your boss to create the world you want to live in."

Steps to Rising Above

Choosing to look for a positive outcome when you feel undermined by a superior will take courage, savvy and emotional self-control. Natural reactions usually gravitate toward the extremes of unhealthy confrontation, avoidance or withdrawal from the situation. But leaders are not locked into those reactions.

For those who want to take the high road, here are five approaches that can help you deal more effectively with a problem boss:

1. **Expect a positive outcome.** First, believe you can reach a mutually beneficial outcome for yourself, your staff and your boss. If you stay focused on your department mission and keep your team focused on their goals, you can soften the impact of an unsupportive superior. "An unsupportive boss is just one of the many roadblocks you will face in leadership," observes Bill Robertson, CEO of Rockville, Md.-based Adventist HealthCare, who has had experiences with unsupportive bosses on his way up. "The challenge is to always keep the end in mind as you face those challenges."
2. **Empower yourself.** Leaders with a difficult boss often talk about how helpless and powerless they feel. When you consider the asymmetrical power relationship between bosses and subordinates, that feeling of helplessness makes perfect sense. Often leaders feel trapped between living with unfair, ineffective or even unethical practices from superiors, as well as the prospect of retribution.

A leader who chooses to voice concerns to a problem boss takes some personal risk, however. "You must accept the potential for a negative impact personally and communicate the situation as you see it," says Robertson.

Other leaders look for a way to escape the situation when the relationship with the boss becomes too painful. Rick Maurer, author of the book *Why Don't You Want What I Want?* (Bard Press, 2002), recommends leaving only as a last resort. "Know when to cut your losses. If the situation is untenable and you think you are powerless to change it, then leave. Don't wait for divine intervention."

Block is circumspect on the decision whether or not to leave, commenting, "As far as leaving, it does not matter whether you stay or go. Wherever you go, you will create the same issues for yourself, if not right away, then over time. The only time I would really suggest leaving is when you just do not care anymore."

But, sometimes sticking it out can pay off. "I have worked for an unsupportive boss and it was hell," recalls John Renz, CEO of Creative Orthotics & Prosthetics Inc. in Elmira, N.Y. "I learned what I could in my position while I served him faithfully, with integrity, to the best of my ability." It took awhile, but eventually Renz's service mindset paid off when another organization recognized his talent and provided an opportunity for him to move into another position.

3. **Exercise influence.** Work on improving your relationship with your boss rather than wishing he will one day see the light and change his ways or leave the organization.

Make the courageous choice to exercise the power you have rather than dwell on circumstances you cannot control. Leaders can take a variety of actions to influence a difficult relationship with the boss. Maurer recommends taking a sober look at the relationship with the boss. "Be willing to ask yourself, 'How am I contributing to this situation?'"

For example, many leaders express an emotional reaction to the boss's behavior far out of proportion to the actual concerns. As Block remarks, "Usually it is just a disagreement, which people magnify into something more dramatic."

Robertson adds, "One must separate feelings about the situation from the facts of the situation."

Leaders caught in the emotional grip of conflict often escalate the problem by elevating their concerns over the boss's head. While an end-run may be necessary if you are dealing with a serious case of negligence, legal issues or ethical problems, taking that step requires some serious forethought.

"If you feel that an action is going to be taken that will be seriously detrimental to the company and its employees, then your first responsibility is to try to persuade your boss," Renz notes. "If your boss is not persuaded, then you should go to his superior and, with a humble spirit, express your opinion."

Renz advocates a positive approach. "Sometimes a gentle word or question will allow a bad boss to see the light and change his behavior, decision or actions." A leader who expresses compassion and self-control in response to the boss's bad behavior can be incredibly disarming.

You want to meet the needs of your boss in a way that respects your own needs. For example, consider the situation of a micro-managing boss who stops by for impromptu "status reports" several times a week. Respond to this behavior by saying, "I would like to keep you informed about the progress of our project team. Would updates at our weekly one-on-one meetings be OK, or would you prefer a more detailed report at the monthly staff meeting?"

Negative confrontation rarely helps the situation. But that doesn't mean you can't be direct. Interestingly, certain personality types need a more frontal approach.

Renz remarks, "Some poor bosses actually do respond to confrontation; they are poor leaders and managers but have enough redeeming qualities that they are willing to listen."

Try approaching the boss by saying, "I want us to work well together. What can I do to be most helpful to our relationship?" Then talk about what you need to do your job well. A businesslike, straightforward conversation about what you both need can work wonders.

If the direct approach doesn't work, the next step is to talk to your human resource manager. But rather than using HR as another way to circumvent the boss, seek guidance on how to best handle the situation. Depending on the nature of the conflict, your HR manager may choose to get involved more directly, particularly if the behaviors in question imply hostility, aggression, sexual harassment or discrimination. If, after all your best efforts, the relationship with the boss ends up turning sour, you will want your HR manager to be familiar with the facts around the situation so he or she can respond with objectivity.

4. **Enhance your relationship with the boss.** If the difficulty with the boss reflects a bad relationship, take steps to rebuild trust. "Building the trust bank with your boss is the goal if you hope to positively change your relationship," says Robertson. "This requires frequent and effective communication and consistently achieving what you set out to accomplish."

Robertson observes that when you keep the lines of communication open it becomes more difficult for superiors or staff to second-guess your motives.

While most leaders agree that keeping the boss informed does a lot to build the relationship, many instinctively withdraw when the pain level gets high enough. But that is the precise moment when you need to make a choice to communicate more than ever in spite of your feelings to the contrary.

If you make the decision to go over the boss's head, you can kiss the relationship goodbye. Other than in the case of blatant ethical lapses, negative politics do more harm than good.

It is extremely difficult to empathize with a bad boss and be supportive even when you feel like you are being undermined. It may help to try and see things from his or her perspective. Bosses are human and imperfect.

Maurer comments that leaders miss the mark, "Not because they are bad or insensitive people, but simply because people [including bosses] tend to be overextended these days."

Robertson adds, "My experience with non-supportive bosses has led me to believe that many of them are dealing with issues of power and/or insecurity." By looking at the boss with empathic eyes you can begin to master your own emotional reactions to the situation.

5. **Express your needs.** Block recommends an open, assertive approach to resolving differences with the boss. "An authentic conversation about what you want from each other is always the first choice."

Approaching that conversation with a problem-solving tone maximizes your odds of getting what you want. Maurer notes, "Ask for support in ways that your boss can accept. I have seen middle managers make unreasonable requests of their boss, never realizing that they wanted way too much time and attention."

Instead, tell your boss, "I have a few ideas on the budget issue I would like to get your input on." Or, "What approaches have you used in situations such as this?" If you disagree with his suggestion, respond with, "I think there is a lot of merit to that approach. Here's an alternative I've been thinking about."

You need to effectively communicate with the boss to establish shared expectations for one another. To do that, clarify your own needs and be able to articulate those needs in a succinct, matter-of-fact manner. Keep your requests business-oriented rather than emotionally charged. Then be ready to explain the business rationale for what you need.

Block advocates a realistic approach: "Let go of your expectations of the boss," he suggests. "All you

have to lose is your ambition."

By being focused and selective you can often get what you really need to meet the most important challenges you are facing, without overwhelming the boss with demands.

Plan of Action

After reviewing the five principles for dealing with the difficult boss, you need to make some decisions about what to do next. Rather than take on the challenge as one big overwhelming mess, it helps to break it into small digestible steps. Here are some approaches that have proved successful.

- **Assess the situation.** "A manager must assess the ground he or she is walking on," notes Maurer. "Take a sober assessment of [the situation]. Is the boss supportive? In what ways? Does my boss get in the way? If so, how? Is my boss unpredictable? What impact does that have?" Focus on the facts and the most important issues.
- **Make a sober self-assessment.** Be willing to acknowledge your role in the situation. Ask your boss what you can do to improve the relationship or increase your service. Be willing to listen and be open to the possibility that you are wrong. Be honest with yourself about how your emotions color your perspective.
- **Put your emotional responses in perspective.** Before you can work effectively with the boss, you must first develop emotional self-control. To master your own emotional responses, re-frame the situation by looking at it from the boss's perspective.

Remember that you are not a victim, just another leader facing another challenge. Difficult bosses are par for the course. Also focus on the learning you will take from the situation. Who knows? You may find yourself in the same situation someday from the other side of the desk.

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- **Approach your boss in a business-like manner.** Be thoughtful and professional when you approach your boss with your requests. Consider his frame of mind, the time of day and the setting. Set up the meeting in advance with ample time to have an unhurried discussion. Be prepared to ask for what you need in a non-threatening way. And also be willing to listen to your boss's concerns. If you respond non-defensively to criticism, your boss will be far more likely to listen to you.

Finally, remember that you may do everything right and the situation will still go terribly wrong. But if you choose to exercise Integrity, you can feel good even when things fall apart. You are not responsible for how your boss acts; you can only control yourself. Bosses come and bosses go, but you take yourself along with you wherever you end up. Make sure you are the kind of person you would like to have as a boss.

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