

Could the “Bully Boss” Become the New Normal?

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In the past century, we’ve become hyper-focused on leadership behavior – in part because of the unusual nature of our national political climate. Could the political arena shape our corporate cultures in the near future? What would happen if current political scenarios somehow crept into the offices of our corporate environments? Specifically, what if the bold, in-your-face leadership style that has captured mainstream media provides the “Bully Boss” with a platform and behavioral affirmation? Abusive (bully) leadership is [defined](#) by employees as harmful, deviant, verbal or non-verbal and physical behavior.

[Research shows](#) employees who perceive their manager as “abusive” are less job satisfied, less committed to their organization, less trusting of their coworkers, more psychologically distressed, more resistant to their manager’s influence attempts and less willing to stand up for their organization. Abusive leaders foster [counterproductive work behavior](#) such as higher turnover and unhealthy organizational climates. They also create cultures of silence – where employees willfully withhold important work-related information out of fear of backlash or resentment.

[Studies show](#) abusive behavior includes outbursts, undermining others and public denigration, which may sound familiar given the current presidential campaigns. Approximately 13 percent of employees (roughly 1.4 million people) experience abusive leadership, which costs organizations an estimated \$23.8 billion dollars in lost productivity, turnover, absenteeism, increased health care costs and employee withdrawal. One can only imagine the financial loss our country would face if leaders acted in this abusive manner.

And unfortunately, one of the most troubling aspects of bully leaders is that their behavior can be contagious. [Research shows](#) abusive behavior trickles down and can become an organization norm, which represents risk. Employees will tend to mimic this behavior if they can remember it, if they can actually behave similarly, and if they have motivation to act as such to get ahead. It’s no wonder a campaign manager engulfed in this type of leadership was charged with battery earlier this year. We can only hope business leaders and employees following the campaigns don’t catch on to this infectious behavior.

Similar to how campaigns are run, not all employees (or groups) are targets of abusive leaders. Some abusive leaders tend to target those employees (or groups) most unlike them or those who they

experience as socially undesirable. Simply put, employees (or groups) are more likely to be targeted when they are least like the boss – another sentiment we’ve seen play out in U.S. politics.

Abusive leadership also reduces creativity. Employees learn that the best way to stay safe in an abusive environment is to reduce their discretionary effort, which means they reduce the amount of time and effort spent to “go the extra mile” in an abusive climate. Employees know the exact amount of effort required to sustain employment in their current job.

In a highly productive, healthy organizational climate where employees are encouraged to voice their views and opinions – where they have appropriate levels of autonomy and encouragement from the leader – discretionary effort expands. In an abusive environment, discretionary effort contracts, slows problem solving, and significantly reduces employee [creativity](#). When employees experience abusive leadership, they tend to believe their organization must not care about their contributions, and doubt whether their contributions have significance or value. This state of mind can lead to employees quitting.

Turnover costs can exceed 100 percent of an employee’s [annual salary](#). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the U.S. annual quit rate is 25 percent. Turnover intentions lead to what is known as a turnover script – internal dialogue that occurs when employees start to think about leaving their employer – usually motivated by bad or abusive experiences. [Research suggests](#) that 54 percent of surveyed employees who are currently dissatisfied intend to leave their jobs when the job market improves.

The bully leader can wreak havoc on an organization. Bullying behavior can trickle down in an organization and become the norm, often resulting in a culture of silence that slows processes and solutions. It can increase involuntary turnover, slow collaborative problem solving, and slow or stop innovation. Organizations must pay close attention to leader behavior. The best defense against a toxic culture rooted in bully behavior is to know who is leading others in your organization. Listen to your employees, encourage employees to speak up and closely monitor whether there are leaders in your organization who are encouraging voice or eliciting silence.

To create a non-abusive environment that encourages employees to speak up, leaders should consider these tips and employees should examine whether their leaders follow these behaviors or not:

- 1. Trust Your Employees:** Ask yourself, “Did I hire stupid people?” Inevitably, most leaders protest, “Of course not!” Those smart people working for you have some good answers sometimes. Instead of asking, “Do you agree?” – where often you get blank stares or head nods – show employees you value their opinions and ideas by asking each one to offer their own solution to the problem.
- 2. Shut Up and Listen:** While this seems simple, your mind processes 450 words of information per minute. However, the average person can only speak at a rate of about 250 words per minute. Your mind is working approximately twice as fast as anyone’s physical ability to speak. Turn off the internal radio in your mind, so you can hear what your employees say. Don’t interrupt, make hurry-up noises or gestures or get distracted by electronic gadgets. When your employees know for certain that you’re interested and actively listening to them, the message is, “you matter.” This message is an affirmation of your employee’s sense of significance and self-worth to the company. If employees feel their concerns are being heard, it’s more likely they’ll stay.

- 3. Coach versus Punish:** When you discover or are made aware of a mistake, listen to the employee describe the situation, maintain and build his or her self-esteem, ask questions and challenge while supporting. Your employees need to know they can rely on you for support. Don't leave this knowledge to chance. You can create a secure environment by demonstrating (through disclosure) humility. Employees know they aren't perfect, and they probably don't expect you to be either. Ask your associate, "With what aspects of the work did you feel best and with what aspects did you struggle?" This language is non-problematic and non-threatening.

We need to be aware and proactive to prevent "Bully Bosses" from becoming the new normal in our offices – and our country.

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