

LEADERSHIP

Are Our Politicians Leading to the New 'Bully Boss?'



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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 small business 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? As you’re starting to grow your business, it’s important to notice if abusive (bully) leadership, which is **defined** by employees as harmful, deviant, verbal or non-verbal and physical behavior, is slithering into your culture.

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 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 -- something to keep in mind as you're starting or growing your business. [Research shows](#) abusive behavior trickles down and can become an organization norm, which represents risk. Employees tend to mimic this behavior if they have motivation to get ahead. We can only hope business leaders 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.

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, solutions and innovation. Organizations must pay close attention to leader behavior. The best defense against a toxic culture rooted in bully behavior is to analyze yourself and 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, small business leaders and entrepreneurs should consider these tips:

1. Maximize emotional intelligence.

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is the ability to sense, understand, manage and apply the power and information of your emotions as your greatest source of energy, influence and connection. It is self-awareness and awareness of others in the moment. With a high EI, you'll know yourself better and hone your ability to recognize your "default" reactions. Leaders with a high EI put the "who" before the "what." They are in a better position to recognize, respect and respond appropriately to others.

Related: [10 Ways Jerks, Whiners and Bullies Ruin a Business](#)

2. Learn more than you affirm.

As a guideline, try to limit the amount of time you "tell" others to 20 percent of your interaction time, and ask questions 80 percent of the time. This may seem like a paradox. Didn't you get to this level in your company by having the answers? Perhaps. However, by demonstrating you don't have all the answers and showing you're curious to learn about employees' views, ideas and opinions -- you are signaling their voice and contributions matter. This message is an affirmation of your employees' sense of significance and self-worth to the company -- the opposite of bullying behavior.

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 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.