

Transforming a Bad Boss to a Better Leader: Lessons from the Field

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Introduction

The 2011 film *Horrible Bosses* depicts a common problem most people wish they knew nothing about, how to cope with a bad boss. Most people know what a bad boss looks like and sounds like from experience even when the experience was short lived and was in the distant past. This is because bad is stronger than good. That is to say, negative events will tend to have a greater impact on the individual than positive events of the same type (Fors Brandebo, et.al., 2015). In other words, the memory of a bad boss is like having weeds in the garden, no matter how hard you try to erase, destroy, or remove the weed, it just keeps coming back. Having an abundance of experiences with a bad boss isn't necessary to know what one is or to articulate the actual behaviors, attitudes or actions that make it difficult to like and respect a bad boss. A bad boss leaves an impression in any work environment and some workplaces are more inclined to foster a culture of aggressive behavior including bullying.

Bullying in the workplace is pervasive (Treadway, 2013) and often allowed to continue or in some cases, it is led by Laissez- faire or Tyrannical leadership. A bad boss can create the conditions that make a work environment untenable. Researchers examining the impact of destructive leadership found tyrannical and laissez-faire leadership to be predictors of job dissatisfaction over a six month and two-year period respectively (Trépanier, 2019). Most people will agree that a horrible boss is one who is destructive in the workplace, oblivious to his or her impact on the company and the employees and willingly uses the power of the position to satisfy personal desires, even when doing so is unethical. The star-studded cast of *Horrible Bosses* depict three kinds of horrible bosses: the psychopath, the maneater and the tool. These three characters display a wide range of dysfunctional and disruptive behaviors that are all too familiar to anyone who has had to endure a bad boss. While the movie is a comedy, the premise and the issues of harassment depicted are among the most serious issues faced in human rights complaints against bosses. In fact, the popularity of the movies would suggest

that it struck a chord. The movie grossed over 200 million in profits and spawned *Horrible Bosses 2*.

What specifically resonates with people when they reflect on their own horrible boss? It could be any number of negative experiences including being micromanaged, bullying, being yelled at in a public setting, being passed over for promotion and in some extreme cases, being fired. Negative experiences notwithstanding, there may also be positive traits and characteristics associated with a bad boss since it isn't likely for anyone to be entirely bad or entirely good. However, the bad boss becomes a problem for both the organization and the employees when supervision becomes abusive. Tepper (2000), defines abusive supervision as subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact. Abusive supervision can impact both the health of workers and the health of the organization since the victims of nonphysical managerial hostility often report diminished well-being that can result in absenteeism, health care costs, and lost productivity (Tepper, 2007). The term abusive supervision is based on the perception of the worker and requires that three characteristics are met. First the abuse is limited to language and does not include physical acts of aggression. Yelling, which is a common practice for frustrated managerial staff would be considered abusive supervision while, pushing, pinching, punching, or slapping qualify as assault. Second the hostility would have to be sustained and not limited to just one bad day when the supervisor takes out his or her frustration on the employees (Tepper, 2007). Finally, the abusive behaviour is perpetrated for a purpose and as such is within the control of the supervisor. Although there is significant research on abusive supervision, other terminology has been used to capture the essence of a bad boss.

Bullying, for example is a term that appears frequently in the literature and in conversations among those who feel they have been the victim of a bad boss. Bullying is considered a subset of aggression (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007) and workplace bullying is not

limited to bosses and leaders. According to researchers Sara Branch, Sheryl Ramsay, and Michelle Barker (2013), bullying in the workplace can occur in all levels of an organization and involve managers to their subordinates (downward bullying) or colleague to colleague (horizontal bullying), and at times subordinates to their supervisor (upward bullying). Unlike the literature on abusive supervision, a commonly held definition for workplace bullying has been elusive. One definition that seems to be accepted by many researchers defines workplace bullying as a situation in which one or more persons systematically and over a long period of time perceive themselves to be on the receiving end of negative treatment on the part of one or more persons, in a situation in which the person(s) exposed to the treatment has difficulty in defending themselves against this treatment (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007). Significant elements of this definition include the long period of time suggesting that the bad treatment must isn't an isolated incident but rather, a situation that occurs over a sustained period. Additionally, the term *negative treatment* although not defined, can be understood to mean any number of behaviours that impact negatively on the victim. The lack of a defined set of behaviours makes it difficult to label certain workplace behaviours as acts of bullying (Branch et. al, 2013). Other researchers Cramaruc and Maidaniuc-Chirila, noted by Maidaniuc-Chirilă (2020) attempt to clarify by suggesting that when a person is the target of negative, persistent, systematic behaviors, for a longer period of time and the person is unable to defend himself one can state that he is a target of the acts of workplace bullying.

An alternate view on bad bosses suggests that the supervisory behaviour can be understood as a set of traits and characteristics that are either constructive or destructive.

Theoretical Constructs

Constructive Leadership Behaviors (CLB)

Constructive leadership is defined by Einarsen et. al., (2007), as acting in “accordance with the legitimate interests of the organization, supporting and enhancing the goals, tasks, and strategy of the organization, as well as making optimal use of organizational resources.” Bosses who are constructive leaders work to enhance the motivation, well-being, and job satisfaction of their followers by engaging in specific behaviors.

Destructive Leadership Behaviors (DLB)

Destructive leadership, can be defined as “the systematic and repeated behavior by a leader, supervisor or manager that violates the legitimate interest of the organization by undermining and/or sabotaging the organization’s goals, tasks, resources and effectiveness and/or the motivation, well-being or job satisfaction of subordinates” (Einarsen et. al., 2007).

Lu et. al.,(2012), refines the definition of destructive leadership to be simply a leader who abuses his/her power and violates the legitimate interest of organization and subordinate with immoral or even illegal behaviors. A destructive leader can impact the organization on two dimensions. First, the leader's behavior can be directed toward subordinates. In this subclass of the bad boss, supervisors and managers often treat their staff disrespectfully, with intolerance and neglect. Such behaviors can border on abuse and often impact minorities and women more so than their white male counterparts.

A second dimension of destructive leadership occurs when the leader’s behavior is directed toward the goal, task, and effectiveness of the organization (Lu, et.al., 2012).

Individuals who fail to understand the work of the organization and his/her role in achieving specific tasks and goals might be considered bad bosses because they don’t have competence or capacity to do the work of the organization. Bad bosses in this subclass can be slow to make

decisions, rely on others for advice or action, and make rookie mistakes even though they are in a leadership position.

It is important to note that a leader who performs destructively on one dimension can possess constructive behaviors on the other. There are leaders, for example the affable school principal, who cannot meet deliverables nor achieve goals and objectives, but who nevertheless create an environment where staff feel respected and enjoy their work environment.

Interest in horrible bosses is not limited to Hollywood elites. Rather, a significant body of research attempts to unpack the multifaceted dimensions of bad bosses. The growing interest in destructive leadership is suggested to be related to its costs, since destructive leadership leads to absenteeism, turnover and impaired effectiveness (Fors Brendebo, et. al., 2015). In recent research there has been a switch from examining constructive forms of leadership behavior and how it might impact outcomes such as health (Trépanier, et. al., 2019) to destructive forms of leadership. Researchers are interested in the impact destructive forms of leadership can have on such organizational outcomes as staff absenteeism, retention and promotion, morale, productivity, and workplace culture. To focus only on one type of leadership would paint only one half of the picture of what happens in workplaces as a function of the leadership within.

Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership is a constructive form of leadership that has been linked to positive staff and organizational outcomes (Trépanier, et. al., 2019). Transformational leadership is viewed in the research literature as being more effective than other leadership styles (Copeland, 2016). Transformational leaders work with teams to identify needed change, creating a vision to guide the change through inspiration, and executing the change in tandem with committed members of a group (Eisele, 2020). In the United States efforts to create better leaders and managers are significant with spending for leadership training and management development

surpassing 15 billion annually (Abajay, 2018). A prevailing belief is that it may be easier to improve leadership behavior than improving the entire structure of an organization (Eisele, 2020).

The need for better bosses is universally felt as diversity increases in both macro and microenvironments. Diversity in organizations, schools and neighborhoods is universally thought to be beneficial. In fact, diversity is increasingly considered an essential success factor in the workforce, (Crews 2016; Gillard 2008). However, although many people regard multiculturalism as positive, increasing diversity in workplaces and in schools can bring about unforeseen challenges. People of different races, ethnicities, cultures, religions and spoken languages are required to work cooperatively, and successfully with each other. Coupled with the challenge of getting along with others, minority groups often experience subtle and ambiguous forms of discrimination. This may be because as overt acts of racism diminish, more subtle and ambiguous forms of prejudice rise (Offerman, et. al., 2014). For example, while African American women are successfully embedded in the workforce, they often experience stalled careers due to the invisible barriers to higher leadership positions (Crews, 2016; Gillard 2008). The desire to have more racialized individuals in fields such as health and education is also likely being hampered by subtle forms of racism and discrimination (Snyder & Schwartz, 2019). Leaders not only hold the key to who gets hired, fired, and promoted, they also impact the work environment.

Research by Chamberlain and Hodson (2010) found that that situations and conditions in the workplace that result in toxic working conditions can be grouped into three categories: interpersonal conflicts (conflicts with supervisors), occupational conditions (lack of autonomy), and organizational conditions (organizational chaos). When negative situations occur in one or all of these categories, they create a toxic work environment that negatively impacts job outcomes. Chamberlain and Hodson (2010) argue that a toxic culture impacts job outcomes in three significant areas: job satisfaction, job commitment, and meaningful work. Job satisfaction

measures the overall health of the relationship between employees and their jobs. Commitment is important because it holds a benefit for the employer- organizational commitment and the worker –commitment based on economic exchange. Meaningful work creates a sense of value and purposefulness between the employee and the organization. While a toxic culture might impact job outcomes in other ways, the authors chose these three areas of significance because they impact both the individual and the organization. A content analysis of over 200 ethnographies confirmed what the literature indicates, supervisory conflict has a negative impact on job outcomes. In other words, a bad boss can create a toxic work environment resulting in a lack of job satisfaction and diminished job commitment.

While the impact a bad boss might have on job outcome is a concern for the organization, the employee might face a double impact of job outcome and a loss in health and well-being. Negative impacts to employee health and well-being becomes a concern for the worker and can negatively impact family relationships. To conceptualize well-being in an objective manner, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) will be used.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

SDT proposes that the work environment can either satisfy or frustrate employees' psychological needs (Trépanier, et. al., 2019). Given the power and influence a boss has in the workplace and the negative impacts DLB can have on employees and the work environment, it is important to determine how well-being might be impacted or used to deflect the potential damage of a bad boss.

SDT posits that well-being is a factor of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Trépanier, et. al., 2019). Autonomy refers to the experience of volition and self-endorsement of one's behavior. Competence entails expressing one's abilities, mastering one's environment and attaining valued outcomes within it, whereas relatedness refers to establishing and maintaining meaningful interpersonal relationships. Autonomy, competence and relatedness are

all negatively impacted by DLB that fall under two leadership styles Tyrannical Leadership and Laissez-faire leadership.

Tyrannical leaders are primarily concerned with achieving organizational success, and often have unrealistic expectations toward employees while laissez-faire leadership, is characteristic of a boss who is absent when needed and indifferent to employees (Trépanier, et. al., 2019). In their 2019 study, Trépanier and colleagues concluded that the tyrannical leadership style is not only related to poor emotional (higher burnout) and attitudinal (lower job commitment) functioning, a tyrannical leader is also linked to lower employee performance, which impacts organizational success. Tyrannical leadership thus impacts negatively on well-being and job outcomes.

Given that bad bosses can impact both the employee and the organization, it is imperative to understand what happens to employees especially those at a leadership level who must report to a tyrannical or laissez-faire boss. Do they replicate the leadership style or find ways to overcome the negative modelling? Furthermore, how does race intersect with toxic work environments created by a boss who engages in more DLB than CLB?

Research Questions

The present study has three objectives. First, it takes a step toward investigating whether leaders who report to a tyrannical or laissez-faire boss also utilize similar DLB in managing their own staff. Second what is the perception of racialized individuals on how their race intersects with supervisor relationships? In other words, are Black, Indigenous, people of colour (BIPOC) more likely to experience a boss with DLB than non-racialized individuals? Third are their characteristics or strategies that enable individuals to survive a bad boss?

R1 Do individuals in leadership roles who have a tyrannical or laissez-faire boss utilize similar DLB in managing their own staff?

R2 Are racialized leaders more likely to view their boss as high in DLB than their non-racialized colleagues?

R3 Do individuals who report a high sense of well-being also attribute to their boss high levels of CLB? Is the reverse true? That is, are individuals who report low well-being levels also straddled with bosses who have low CLB ratings but high DLB levels?

R4 What factors, if any, allow employees to not only survive but thrive under a bad boss?

Ethnographic Field Strategy

In order to examine how a bad boss impacts leaders and workers in an organization an ethnographic study will be conducted since it offers the opportunity to study the culture (Lune & Berg, 2017) of an organization and the role of the leader in that organization. For the purposes of this study the researcher is part of the group of leaders being studied and apart from the group simultaneously. A micro-ethnographic study will be utilized to examine school leaders across different districts rather than all leaders (macro) in the educational system. The goal is to examine the social discourse at play between a school leader and their staff and the same leader and their superior. Examining the outcomes of such social interactions allows for identifying the underlying principles and concepts at play.

This investigation will utilize analytic ethnography, coined by Lofland and described in *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, (Lune & Berg, 2017, p.98) with an aim to: (a) *provide generic propositional answers to questions about social life* (leadership behavior) *and organization*; (b) *pursue such an attempt in a spirit of unfettered or naturalistic inquiry*; (c) *utilize data based on deep familiarity with a social setting* (school leadership) *or situation that is gained by personal participation or an approximation of it*; (d) *develop the generic propositional analysis over the course of doing research*; (e) *present data and analyses that are true*; (f)

provide data and/or analyses that are new; and (g) present an analysis that is developed in the senses of being conceptually elaborated, descriptively detailed and concept data interpenetrated.

Population Sample

Ideally participants should be public school elementary or secondary school principals who are recently or partially retired. The study would be open to principals from Catholic and French districts principals. Ideally participants should reflect the ethnic fabric of society as well as various social identities in order to make inferences from the small sample size generalizable to the larger population of school leaders. Although probability sampling would ensure that mathematically subgroups of the principal population will be representative, it may be more beneficial to have principals participate rather than to require that those who participate meet some defined criteria that individuals might prefer to keep hidden such as sexual orientation, gender identity, religion or Indigenous status.

Participants will need to have work experience with more than one boss and be willing to answer interview questions about a previous boss who they would characterize as “bad”. The bad boss should meet the general description of a bad boss: an individual who damages the reputation of the organization, engages in corruption, fraud, bullying, manipulation, immorality and so on (Lu, et. al., 2012). Participants might identify their boss as a bully since bullies often leverage the fear and intimidation of their behavior to achieve their personal goals and improve their job performance (Treadway, et. al., 2013).

Selection and Size

Ideally for research that requires interviews for data collection, a large robust sample size of 30 participants would be most advantageous. Since interviews are being conducted the researcher has to factor in individuals who begin the process but do not complete the interview(s) for whatever reason. A reasonable buffer against unexpected attrition might be a 20% overage. Therefore if the intent is to have 30 completed interviews it might be best for the researcher to interview between 36 and 40 individuals.

Convenience Sampling could be used by offering all retiring principals the opportunity to engage in a survey. Currently the Retired Teachers of Ontario (RTO) invite individuals planning a retirement to complete various surveys. An invitation to participate in this study could be added to the RTO website with information on the study and researcher contact information. In addition, the Ontario Teachers Pension Plan is another source for recruiting candidates for the study. OTPP has an announcement page where the study could be described along with contact information for the researcher.

Snowballing might also be used to target a small group of retired professionals such as the Ontario Retired Teachers' Association. Each participant would be encouraged to "invite a friend" to participate in the study and thus grow the sample size with individuals who are likely to have common traits and profiles.

Finally, participants might be recruited from an open Facebook Group titled: *Tell Me About Your Horrible Boss*. Participants joining the group would be asked to complete demographic information such as administrative category, years as an administrator and the number of supervisors (superintendents) who were direct reports. Each participant would be interviewed as part of the study.

Ethical Considerations

Asking individuals to discuss and characterize a previous boss might be seen as a breach in confidentiality at worst and gossip at best. The researcher will need to ensure that all information is kept confidential and coded to ensure anonymity. Conclusions drawn from the data are intended to assist in the broader knowledge base of the impact of DLB and CLB on groups of individuals and specifically how to use leadership as a tool to improve workplace culture, climate and leadership.

For some participants who are describing a recent or current boss participation in the study might elicit feelings of vulnerability. Participants should be encouraged to be honest and forthright; however, the researcher must also ensure that no identifiable information is included in the description of the data nor in the discussion of findings.

Research Design

Participants, recruited to participate in this study will reflect on a “bad boss” they once had or currently have. Participants will have the choice to respond to a paper-pencil or to an online questionnaire to evaluate their immediate supervisor’s leadership and their own levels of thriving at work using the three survey tools: GLT, TLS and WWS. No incentives will be offered.

Participants will be informed of the confidentiality of their individual responses and be required to provide informed consent prior to participation.

Demographic information such as age, education level, current work position, sex and working hours per week will be collected.

A small subset (15 - 25) of those who complete the three surveys will be selected for in depth quantitative interviews.

A qualitative-based multi-case model of the effects of toxic conditions including interpersonal, occupational, and organization conditions is thus needed, but gathering data to evaluate such a model has been difficult (Chamberlain & Hodson, 2010).

Data Analysis Strategy

Regression analysis can be used to examine how variables such as race impact with how superiors are viewed by their subordinates. Additionally, by rating a bad boss on a scale examining DLB and having participants rate themselves on the same scale it may be possible to determine how closely subordinates mimic the behaviours of their leaders/

Descriptive statistics will be used along with multivariate analysis

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