

Successful Supervisor Part 58

Don't Be a Bully Supervisor

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

A student in one of my graduate leadership classes posed an interesting question. If bully supervisors cause so much grief, why are so many of them allowed to remain in power? The question got me thinking of the many reasons bully supervisors, even the extreme ones, seem to hang onto their positions. Here are some of the reasons.

Weak Leadership Above - If a bully supervisor is allowed to remain in place, it means the leaders above him or her are not doing a good job. If those in charge look the other way while a supervisor is abusing people, then they are the real culprits. It is rather easy to spot a bully supervisor when doing a 360 degree review process, so once one is identified, if the person is allowed to stay in a supervisory position year after year, I blame the next level of leadership.

Also, weak leadership might look the other way because the bully has powerful allies. Bully supervisors intimidate people at their own level and higher in the organization. They know the buttons to push or people to pressure in order to get their own way. If a weak leader is afraid of the bully, that can be a reason this person is allowed to continue.

If the bully is the top dog and not beholden to anyone, there is no force from above to curtail the negative behaviors. In this case, barring some kind of epiphany, the bully will keep on with the same conduct until he or she leaves. Attempts from below to enlighten this person will usually be fruitless; they may even exacerbate the problem.

Sufficing - A bully supervisor does elicit compliance because people are fearful. The unit reporting to this supervisor will perform at a credible level, even though people are unhappy and underutilized. The crime is that the unit could be so much better, and the lives of the workers could be richer if the supervisor was replaced by someone with higher Emotional Intelligence. Many units get by sufficing on a culture of compliance and avoidance and do not even realize the huge potential they are missing.

Being Clueless - I have written on this before. The idea is that most bullies simply do not see themselves accurately. They would view themselves as being tough or having

high standards of conduct. My observation is that most bully supervisors are genuinely proud of their prowess at getting people to behave. They have no impetus to change, because their twisted logic reinforces the behaviors that elicit compliance. They often view themselves as smarter than the people working for them and bark out orders because they sincerely believe they know best.

Another clueless possibility is that the entire corporate culture is stuck in this Ebenezer Scrooge mentality. Hard as it is to fathom, there are still old-style companies where management likes to terrorize. The same holds for family businesses where one generation intimidates the next.

Lack of trust - A bully supervisor trashes trust on a daily basis without realizing it. When trust is low, all other functions in the organization operate like a car would run on watered-down gasoline. The irony is that when the bully supervisor sees things sputtering and not working well, the logical reaction is to jump in with combat boots on to "fix" the problems. That bullying behavior perpetuates the problem in a vicious cycle of cause and effect. If there is no external force to break the cycle, it will just continue.

Short term focus - Most bully supervisors have a fixation on short term actions and do not see the long term damage being done to the culture. They would describe "culture" as some squishy concept that is for softies. If you propose ideas to improve the culture to a bully supervisor, he or she will start talking about performance and accountability. Holding people accountable is a very popular phrase in management these days. Imagine a world where there was less need to talk about holding people accountable because the culture they worked in was one that automatically extracted their maximum discretionary effort. If the vast majority of workers in a unit habitually performed at the very peak of their potential because they wanted to, then accountability would take care of itself.

Lack of skills - Bully supervisors often have not had good leadership capabilities built in through training and mentoring. You cannot blame a tyrant if he or she has never been shown a better way to lead. Bully supervisors are often accused of having a "my way or the highway" attitude toward people, but I would contend that many of these misguided individuals simply feel "my way is the only way I know how to get things done." For these leaders, some intensive reprogramming can be an effective antidote only if they come to the table eager to learn new ways.

Fear means people will not challenge - Most workers are not going to be willing to challenge a bully supervisor. The fear of getting their heads chopped off for leveling with the boss makes the prospect of telling the truth feel like knowingly walking into a lion's

den. Every once in a while there is a person so foolish or confident that he will just walk into the lion's den because there is little to lose. This person can help provide shock therapy for bully leaders by providing data on how the behaviors are actually blocking the very things the leader wants to accomplish. These people might be called "whistle blowers" because they provide an errant supervisor, or the leadership above, with knowledge of what is actually happening.

Occasionally, a bully supervisor is so extreme that he or she must be removed and replaced by a more people-oriented supervisor. Unfortunately, it is also true that many bully bosses have the ability to remain in place for long stretches. This adherence to power is extremely costly to the organization in terms of current and future performance along with a prime cause of high turnover. If you have a bully supervisor reporting to you, get him or her some help through training or coaching. If that does not work, move the bully out of a leadership role and put in someone with high Emotional Intelligence.

This is a part in a series of articles on "Successful Supervision." The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision or on this blog.

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