

The Trouble with Bosses—Part One

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A few years ago, I was sitting in my office at 5:30 pm on a warm and sunny Friday afternoon when the CEO dropped by to chat with my colleague next door. As I finished my work and gathered my things to head out for the weekend, I heard my colleague phone his wife to explain that he'd be late again because he'd just been given an assignment that had to be completed before he left the office. I overheard him say, "I love my job; it's my boss I hate."

If this had been the first time for such a request, I know my colleague would have willingly complied. However, our boss regularly demanded work on evening, weekend and even holiday hours with no allowance for our personal lives and other commitments. This particular project on this Friday afternoon was part of a pattern that disregarded our lives outside of work. Our boss felt he owned our time and was entitled to ask for more whenever he wanted. This project could've been completed anytime before the following Monday morning with no consequences to the company or the client, but our CEO insisted that it be done on Friday evening so he wouldn't have to think about it over the weekend.

Perhaps you've known a Taskmaster boss like mine. Or, you've worked with the Helicopter Boss who hovers nearby, constantly fretting and suggesting that he doesn't trust you to make decisions without his oversight. Maybe you've met the Tornado Boss who storms in, creates chaos, and leaves a trail of destruction for you to clean up. There are other troubling management styles, but these are the three I hear complaints about most often. What can you do if you work for—or, happen to be—one of these disruptive bosses?

This article is the first in a series of troubling boss behaviors. I'll begin the series with the Taskmaster, or I-Own-You mentality. This behavior may be more prevalent in the wake of the recession and staff reductions, but it's been around for decades. Silicon Valley engineers have been known for keeping sleeping bags in their cubicles so they could catch a quick nap as they worked around the clock to get the latest technology product out the door ahead of the competition. Financial services companies have required 100+ hour work-weeks of their employees, dangling the promise of wealth and early retirement. And the other companies used these examples to question the dedication of anyone unwilling to make a similar commitment. But, do these companies actually receive the full measure of benefit they expect when they push for more hours on the job?

We've learned that when employees feel they're cared about as a person, their commitment to the business increases. When they believe that their boss cares about their personal well-being, they are motivated to produce more and better work. They are also less likely to leave or steal from the company because they feel connected in a tribe-like social structure where they know how their work impacts everyone else. When they have time away from work to relax and enjoy family, friends and hobbies, they return with more creativity, enthusiasm and dedication to the company.

The Taskmaster boss actually gets less, not more, from his/her team, in the environment that disregards the person in the employee and undermines autonomy.

Talented employees who have healthy boundaries in their lives will not allow themselves to be treated like machines. They will refuse the unreasonable requests and if that fails to alter the relationship, they will leave the company, taking their knowledge, talent and contacts with them. The Taskmaster boss who has been worried about getting enough from his (or her) employees is then left with nothing and starts the cycle over again.

Here are some suggestions for dealing with this difficult boss, even if you're the one whose behavior needs to change:

1. Set limits on how much the team is asked to do, above and beyond their normal work load.
2. Encourage others (and yourself) to create a balance of work and other interests in their lives.
3. Look for opportunities to get to know people individually. Ask about their weekend and their family. Don't pry into personal matters, but invite conversation and show interest.
4. Encourage others (and yourself) to use paid vacation, holiday and time off benefits.
5. Create connections—celebrate birthdays and special occasions. Include the team in celebrating company milestones.
6. Have fun together.

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