



10 TOXIC MISTAKES YOU COULD BE MAKING AS A BOSS

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Heed this manager's guide to identifying bad boss behavior.

By Brittany Taylor - March 30, 2015



We've all had bad managers. You know the ones -- they make Miranda Priestly look tame. They inspire the stories you tell at happy hour and are the ghosts that haunt your every career move. And though you swear you'll never be like them, how sure are you that their toxic ways aren't tarnishing your own management skills? Sometimes we fall back on bad habits. What's important is to put a stop to them immediately.

So are your management moves the right ones or do they need a makeover? We talked to three senior management experts in the industry: **J.T. Hroncich**, managing director of Capitol Media Solutions, a media buying and strategy company in Atlanta and Washington, D.C.; **Amy Muntz**, executive vice president of strategy at advertising agency Allen & Gerritsen; and **Christine Stack**, a

partner at Liberty Blue, a communications industry placement agency.

Read on for ten employee-alienating actions and tips on how to turn your work style around.

1. You're all business, all the time.

From 9 to 5 or 10 to 6 or 24/7, you are on the clock, and that means you're the boss -- not a friend, not a coworker, not a sympathetic ear. You've got things to do, projects to complete, websites to launch, books to publish. But when you do this, you risk your employees feeling isolated or underappreciated.

"This is harder with 100-plus employee companies, but I have a small business and I think particularly in smaller companies, it's important to take an interest in the people and their lives," says Hroncich.

Muntz agrees. "Sometimes it's hard to manage all the day to day and make time to connect with the human beings we work with," she says. "The biggest disconnects happen when people feel like their managers aren't connected to them and the things that matter to them inside and outside of work."

It doesn't take a lot of effort to ask how someone's day is going, what plans they have for the weekend or how their family is doing. But this small gesture can make a huge difference in the eyes of your employees.

2. You keep company news to yourself.

While there are some secrets worth keeping -- the Coca Cola recipe, which AT&T insider hooked you up with that awesome data plan, the 45th wedding anniversary party you're throwing your parents -- others tend to breed distrust.

Muntz says that much of the time, what seems like a lack of transparency can actually be due diligence when it comes to the decision-making process. However, if you're keeping mum on company happenings (that are public knowledge or soon will be), personnel changes that affect your daily responsibilities or client updates, your team may resent you for not looping them in. Chances are, the info will leak out anyway, so give your employees the courtesy of hearing the news from you first.

"The challenge for managers is to be open and transparent even if you don't have all the answers," Muntz says. Even so, open up about what you do know. "Don't let things linger or keep your employees waiting and guessing," adds Muntz.

"The line between friend and manager is a narrow one."

3. You've become buddies with your team.

The line between friend and manager is a narrow one. While you're busy focusing on the tightrope beneath your feet -- and all the projects you're juggling in the meantime -- you might not notice that you're a little too buddy-buddy with certain employees, or friendlier with some more than others.

"Hanging out outside the office or having a drink after work occasionally is fine," Hroncich says. "But the casual relationship has to change into a professional once you get inside the office doors. It can create an environment where management isn't respected inside the office or can create the perception -- or reality -- of favoritism."

If you were promoted from part of the team to the head of it, this becomes an even greater problem, as Stack can attest to. "I wish I wouldn't have worried so much about getting everybody to like me, to be everyone's friend," she says. "In the end, people may not like you or agree with you, but it's important that they respect what you do." Her solution: "A team meeting to set the tone is imperative."

4. You blow off annual reviews.

From self-evaluations to biopic-length formal writeups, annual reviews are part of most company policies. For managers, review season may always seem to coincide with a particularly busy time of the year. But just because your plate's overflowing doesn't mean you should drop this must-do to the bottom of your list.

"If you can't get to a formal review in a timely manner, at least shoot for clear and consistent feedback in a general sense about [your employees'] performance or any issue," Hroncich says. "Doing that eliminates or at least reduces surprises when the formal review does happen."

Muntz stands firm on this point. "People that come to work for you every day deserve to have these conversations and they shouldn't just happen once a year," she says. "We should be doing formal check-ins quarterly and informal check-ins at least monthly."

5. You ignore conflicts between your staff members.

Even if you love watching Bravo's nightly smackdowns, chances are you're not huge on inciting your own disturbances, domestic or otherwise. Still, when employees are at each other's throats -- or, worse, passive aggressively throwing each other under the proverbial bus -- it's up to you to step in.

"I recall addressing a situation similar to this as a manager and I will admit it was the most difficult and nauseating day of my career," she confesses. "Put simply, ask for help: engage your HR director, outline the situation as well as what the ultimate outcome is desired, and collectively shape a plan of action."

Mediation is essential and most effective when the conflict is just beginning. Letting it fester will tank your team's morale and productivity, Stack says.

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6. You resist change and, in the process, stifle creativity.

You've gotten to the point that your work flow is fluid. You know how to work even the most finicky of databases. You've cracked the analytics software wide open. Your project management rhythm is down. You are, in a word, comfortable -- and you like it that way. But that's not necessarily a reason to push the status quo.

"With this perspective," Stack warns, "you will make yourself obsolete -- and smart, driven achievers won't want to work with you."

And if you are resistant to change, how can you possibly help promote the innovation of your employees and, thus, your company?

"I wish more managers would truly start fostering creativity," Muntz says. "As an industry, we talk a good game when it comes to creativity, but I don't think we put enough energy into rewarding our teams for developing solutions that are novel, innovative and unexpected."

Stack encourages managers to give their team members frequent opportunities to present new ideas or offer solutions to a current challenge. And if those ideas don't work, explain why. Just be sure to keep the creative juices flowing.

7. You have a no-mistakes policy.

You're not one to bet twice on a losing horse, so when a team member flubs a project, you refuse to let her touch it again -- ever. You won't let her forget about that one mistake... or allow her to learn from it.

Instead of steamrolling the employee, guide her through the process, Stack urges. First, identify the mistake, so there's no question in her mind what she did wrong. Then give her the opportunity to make up for the error.

Hroncich emphasizes the need to establish -- and earn back -- trust. Let the employee's track record speak for itself. "If it is a one-time thing and it's still big deal, I probably wouldn't take [my trust] away from them if they didn't have a track record for screwing things up," he says.

However, if the employee is a repeat offender, despite your frequent admonitions, says Stack, "then sadly she's simply not getting it, and action needs to be taken." That action might be transferring her to another, more appropriate, role -- or, worst case, asking her to leave.

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8. You don't address problems when they happen.

On the flipside, perhaps you're too lax with your employees. Instead of working to solve problems with stumbling employees, you go ahead and fix them yourself -- hey, you reason, it's faster this way. And then after the offenses have built up and you finally unleash a firestorm, it comes across as out of the blue from your employee's perspective.

"The issue here is simple: lack of honest communication," Stack says. "You haven't been fair nor have you given this person the opportunity to improve." Trotting out a list of problems, major and minor, all at once "has powder keg potential," she adds.

It's a better strategy to outline a list of things that have worked this year (start with the positives), and then get into the things that have not worked. The goal is for the employee to come away from the discussion with ways to improve his performance and have an action plan in place to reach his or her full potential.

Follow-up is essential here. Be sure to set up monthly conversation reminders so you can see how he's faring, particularly against your expectations and concerns.

9. You don't delegate.

When you spend the time to learn how to do something really well, it can be difficult to let someone else take a stab at it. But when you become a manager, your job is to guide others as they do much of the work you did before. Your task is to oversee the project, not DIY.

"Delegation was probably the most difficult skill for me to develop; in some ways, it still is," Stack says. "Getting beyond the concept of 'Get it done now!' to instead taking the time to educate others and oversee their execution was a difficult ask for a control-freak like myself."

Nonetheless, it's essential to give your employees the chance to expand their responsibilities and develop new skills. In the end, it will benefit you both to move a few things off your epic to-do list.

10. You're a serial micromanager.

Ah, the catch-22 of delegating a task to a team member only to minutely oversee his every mouse click. The three senior managers we talked to each cited it as the No. 1 gripe employees have about their bosses.

And Muntz totally gets it. "I was a complete micromanager when I first started out," she says. "Like many new managers, I tried to stay on top of every little thing my team did, which was unproductive and exhausting. It eventually led to me having to let go."

The fact is being a great manager means you are comfortable setting the vision and empowering the talented folks you have on your team, adds Muntz. "The best managers don't tell others how to do their work; they help create and nurture an environment where their team can do their best work."

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