

# Bad Managers Can Do More Damage Than You Think

*Shôn Ellerton, December 4, 2019*

*The undesirable behaviours and actions of bad managers can often be felt by many others including families, friends, and colleagues.*



What is often not thought about or discussed very often is how the behaviours and actions of bad managers can affect others including families, friends, and colleagues. In some cases, good managers are often inadvertently taken advantage of to fill in the discrepancies left behind by other bad managers.

Let's start at what could be defined as a good or a bad manager.

## What is a good or bad manager?

Many of us have shared our experiences to others what it's like to work under a good manager or a bad one; however, it depends on which way they're good or bad.

All too often, what the business interprets as being a great manager may be felt by many working under that same manager to be a horrible and traumatic experience. Unfortunately, many of these managers remain on the throne and the main reason is this: fear. Fear by those who are afraid to stand up and say anything about it. And yes, managers of unpleasant regimes often stand unchallenged, many even progressing higher up the ranks of the organisation if business is good.

## **Poor behaviour, great performance**

One could have a manager who continuously loses his temper, slaps the backsides of young women as they prance by his desk and takes regular swigs from a bottle of whisky lurking behind his desk. However, that same individual could be responsible for generating growth in the business resulting in more employment and opportunities despite being a total jerk.

## **Great behaviour, poor performance**

On the other hand, one could have the most caring, empathetic and kindest of managers who values life balance over work, promotes health and wellbeing into the working environment and practices self-control and modesty. However, that same wonderful beacon of humankind could be completely and utterly useless undertaking the job relying purely on the momentum of success delivered by a previous incumbent.

## **Polar extremes**

The two examples above are, of course, examples of polar extremes; both displaying characteristics considered of being good, bad, effective or ineffective. In practice, probably (and hopefully), such occurrences would not happen very often. The first example is clearly beneficial to the 'bottom line' of the business although the uncandid and offensive behaviour displayed would, undoubtedly, deeply upset and alienate most working under such a regime. The second example illustrates a working environment most would be proud and happy to be a part of; however, questions will necessarily follow as to the validity of retaining someone who starts to erode down the business due to sheer ineptitude.

## **We often read about bad management**

I frequently come across articles, posts, memes and one-liner quotes in my social media feed purporting to educate the reader that only kind and empathetic leaders make good managers, or, that managers that do not show respect to their staff or behave imprudently will never make good leaders. I'm sure many of us have encountered some of these '*I-hope-my-boss-reads-these*' posts in our social media feed. Sure, that would be great, but is this what happens?

Sometimes yes, but, often, a big fat NO. So often, when these posts get read, it makes out like it's all a new great fantastic thing that industries are adopting; being nice, empathetic, caring, and so on. It's easy to forget that this sort of stuff has been talked and written about for many decades, the difference being,

it simply wasn't popping up randomly and frequently on business-oriented social media sites.

## Settling differences directly

Generally, most of the bosses I worked for have been well-balanced, respectful, empathetic and effective managers. Well-balanced, implying that they carried out their work details in line with both the interests of the business and their employees. I'll be honest in saying that I have not always been the model employee, nor have I always been the best role model as a leader. We all make mistakes from time to time.

I have had a couple of managers in the past who I've gotten on the wrong side of, but come what may, we sorted out our differences directly face-to-face. Most outcomes using direct, open and honest communications are favourable, some ending in the creation of stronger bonds than before.

## Suffering in silence and fear

However, there are managers who condescend and bully their employees exhibiting absolutely no compassion or empathy.

Many large companies and organisations in Australia and many parts of the world have *employee assistance programs* whom may be consulted on by the employee to address any such issues as bullying, mistreatment and unfairness, to name a few, within a safe and confidential environment. It is often standard practice for the employee to first engage directly with the manager to leverage a solution; however, this step is often omitted out of fear of conducting a face-to-face discussion. Even if a direct discussion did take place, it is often the case that nothing transpires out of it, or if it did, it is forgotten about and conveniently 'swept under the carpet'.

Many employees are also reluctant to approach their employee assistance programs for fear of any repercussions that may come out of it. What *does* tend to happen is for employees to live with the problem for months or even years with the occasional solace being found by confiding with other fellow employees suffering the same situation. Many employees simply quit. This is, clearly, not a good thing.

For one, managers further up the chain are simply not aware of the events which are happening. They may have received poor performance reports but failed to ask the right questions unaware that staff morale is at an all-time-low. They may have, possibly, been aware of a relatively high turnover rate of employees but

do not usually bother to conduct [exit interviews](#) with those more than a level down the pecking order. Worse still is the reluctance by those above to intervene but rather take the 'get-out' approach of having the employee sort the problem out directly with his or her manager, simply hoping for the best.

The outcome of all this is that the employee either continues to work in an uncomfortable work environment in suffering silence and fear or makes the decision to move on.

## How a bad manager affects others

It is distressing for anyone to be in such a predicament. But there's a far worse by-product that materialises out of all this: the ill effect it has on the rest of the family, close relatives and friends. This is often not discussed or talked about.

My wife, a part-time registered nurse in Adelaide, suffered over many years working for a manager infamous for causing distress and anxiety to her staff. Nursing as a profession can be stressful as it is without it needlessly being compounded by a bully manager. Most of my wife's colleagues have either been too scared to complain formally or simply caved in opting to quit at the first available opportunity.

This unwelcome behaviour from my wife's manager began to affect our family in so many ways. With a young child in tow and I having to spend time away from the family on occasional business travel, my wife was finding it incredibly difficult to juggle scheduled days of childcare on the whims of her manager having to chop and interchange her roster. For those familiar with how childcare works, you would understand how difficult it is to suddenly change days, even weeks in advance. Thankfully, her fellow nurses are sometimes willing to swap their rosters with her; however, this becomes a tiresome process when the need to swap arises too frequently. Moreover, we do not have other family members living in Adelaide so the option of a grandparent or sibling to help us out is not an option. As an aside, the system of childcare and school hours in Australia is certainly not geared up for families with two working parents.

Meanwhile, her stress levels mounted which, invariably, rubbed off to me. In cases where she had no options left when a roster conflicted with the childcare schedule, I had to ask my manager if I could work from home. That manager, although having children of her own, was not entirely trusting of staff working from home so it started becoming a chore to request permission to do so. Thankfully, I had a new manager who was entirely understanding of the situation and allowed me to do so without the feeling of it being a 'privilege'.

## Are policies and guidelines effective?

Policies and guidelines are often released by employers in the interests of maintaining employee wellbeing and satisfaction; however, they are often, sadly, ineffective. The intention is usually good, but in practice, a ‘white elephant’.

The government of South Australia released a mandatory compliance document ([Flexible Workplaces Policy Directive](#)) outlining the objectives of

1. promoting a positive workplace culture where employees feel valued and supported;
2. retaining and attracting the best talent;
3. increasing productivity by assisting employees to balance their work, family and other personal obligations and interests;
4. contributing to foster flexible working conditions;
5. improving employee satisfaction, health and wellbeing and commitment;
6. ensuring consistency with legal, industrial and policy frameworks.

This directive was delivered to all health departments within the government of South Australia including my wife’s department. I’m unhappy to say that, apart from the last bullet point above, that NONE of the above were remotely addressed, or possibly even considered, by her manager.

For any policy to be effective, not only must there be specific guidelines in place, but there must be consequences outlined in the policy should the guidelines *not* be met.

## Conclusion

What makes a good relationship between manager and employee is trust and respect along with all the other important people skills including listening, mentoring, being able to delegate appropriately, not to micromanage and, most importantly, being approachable.

It is unfortunate when one takes advantage of the ‘good’ manager to offset the deficiencies created by another ‘bad’ manager as what happened to me and my wife. Selfish, bullyish, inflexible and untrusting managers may not be aware that their actions have unintended consequences onto many others. Whole families may become stressed. Good relationships between spouses and their managers often become stretched when their managers are continuously having to avail themselves to fill the shortfall created by the bad manager.

Finally, being a good manager is not often an easy role to fulfil. Managers, themselves, have their own sets of challenges to overcome. They, in turn, may be the victim of bad management themselves which only compounds to an already toxic workplace. Sometimes there is no easy solution. It is all too easy to suggest that the best way forward is to conduct direct discussions between employee and manager hoping that an amenable outcome will follow; however, this is not always the case.

To alleviate this problem, some organisations have adopted the *people manager* model whereby employees report functionally to a *line manager* but other HR requirements such as leave, salary, wellbeing and coaching are undertaken by a *people manager*, often residing in a different department of the business. I was, once, in a business that adopted this model; however, it became overly complicated and, ultimately, failed having to revert to the previous *line manager* model.

Again, there is no easy answer, but open and honest communication is usually the key to reconciling differences and making the best of a bad situation. If one is put in a position of managing others, it may be of some value to reflect that undesirable behaviours and actions exhibited by managers often affect more than just the employee.