
The Bad Influence of Aggressive Bosses



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Identifying with an aggressor is a basic strategy for human survival. It's time to call it out in the workplace.

Derek, a senior VP in an engineering firm, had a legendary temper and no qualms about publicly castigating anyone who got in his way. He was an insufferable micro-manager and his habit of taking credit for other people's work created great resentment. Given his leadership style, his subordinates were perpetually on edge, always wondering when it would be their turn to be his target. His toxic behaviour was so pervasive that his actions impacted the morale in the company.

To make matters worse, Derek's leadership style had led to copycat behaviour, with some of his key lieutenants mimicking his abusiveness. Like Derek, they had developed a knack for terrorising their juniors.

Mirroring as an evolutionary defence mechanism

By identifying with their aggressor, Derek's colleagues were exhibiting a psychological behaviour typical of people who find themselves in a weak position. Mirroring a person who represents a threat allows people to deal with painful and extremely stressful experiences. It gives them a way to conquer their fears by becoming like that person.

"Identification with the aggressor" as a psychological defence mechanism was first introduced in the context of child development by two psychoanalysts: Sándor Ferenczi and Anna Freud. Ferenczi found evidence that children who are terrified by out-of-control adults will "subordinate themselves like automata to the will of the aggressor". Anna Freud noted that by impersonating the aggressor, "the child transforms himself from the person threatened into the person who makes the threat".

In its mildest form, identification with the aggressor can be seen as a healthy defence mechanism and may serve an evolutionary purpose. It allows people to adjust to situations perceived as threatening. However, as illustrated in the opening example, chronic identification with the aggressor can lead victims to become aggressors themselves. In particular, children who have been exposed to highly dysfunctional childhood practices are in adulthood more likely to adopt the same negative behaviour patterns as a survival strategy.

What's even more troublesome is that, over time, people who identify with their aggressor may lose their sense of self. Haunted by anxiety, they become hyper-attentive to people who intimidate them.

Identification with the aggressor is a human foible

As Stanley Milgram's disturbing electric shock experiments showed, most of us are all too willing to give up our autonomy when confronted with forceful, strong-armed figures. It's fair to assume that identification with the aggressor (on a smaller scale) operates invisibly but pervasively in the everyday lives of many people.

In the company of authoritative individuals, we quickly put our own thoughts, feelings, perceptions and judgements aside, and instead, do—and more importantly think and feel—as we are *expected to*.

Breaking the pattern

How can we resist this dysfunctional behaviour process? The first step in breaking a victimisation pattern is recognising that we have fallen into the trap of identifying with the aggressor. It is usually others who make us see the light. When we are defending or rationalising the actions of someone who is mistreating us, it takes people who know us well to call us out.

The question then is, how do we digest the feedback given to us? Are we ready to face the unpleasant truth that we have become the aggressor? Freeing oneself from an identification bond isn't easy. People prone to identifying with an aggressor may, due to shame and guilt reactions, resort to denial.

Unfortunately, lengthy exposure to an intimidating boss can affect someone's personality, to the extent that behavioural changes endure outside the intimidating person's orbit. If that's the case, extensive coaching or therapy can play an important role and help us understand that there are complex psychological dynamics at play and that mirroring behaviour derives from a basic human survival strategy. Only through recognising the source of these dynamics will we be able to exert control.

Going back to Derek's example, was it inevitable that his lieutenants would come to mirror him? Could there have been other, more productive ways of dealing with such an intimidating boss?

Fighting back

One way to build up "immunity" against people like Derek is to band together and create a *support group*. Instead of individuals coping in isolation, a support group can provide strength and reassurance, as well as a reality check that can help prevent members from identifying with the aggressor. Another proactive measure could be to build up a *political network* inside the organisation with the ultimate purpose of getting rid of the toxic boss.

It's important to let other people in the organisation know about the destructive consequences of Derek's leadership style. The expectation is that, if enough people realise the human and financial costs of his behaviour, senior leaders will take notice and be forced into accountability. It may be wise to document specific incidents of abuse to build a case (if necessary) for potential legal proceedings.

In sum, we should remind ourselves that in the worst-case scenario, it's always possible to walk away. And whatever we do, we should keep in mind Marcus Aurelius's remark: "The most complete revenge is not to imitate the aggressor."

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