
Three “Bad Boss” Habits to Avoid in 2024



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Resist the urge to emotionally detach, control outcomes or blindly comply.

As the new year swings open its doors, promising a fresh start and a burst of motivation, it also brings the daunting prospect of having to do it all over again. Despite our best efforts to lead with empathy, authenticity and clarity, we often find ourselves slipping back into bad habits that can frustrate our teams and harm our organisations.

The characteristics of good bosses is a subject of ongoing debate. Countless books are written on the topic each year, many of which offer inconclusive findings. However, certain fundamentals remain unquestionable: a clear vision; a well-defined and aligned strategy; an inclusive, intellectually stimulating, and creative work environment; and a commitment to developing employees to their full potential.

While this looks achievable on paper, events often derail us from our “true north”. When emotions run high, we become susceptible to falling into three mindsets that undermine our effectiveness and erode trust within

our teams.

1. The self-protector

These leaders are driven by a need for self-preservation, which manifests as aloofness and a preference for intellect rather than empathy in their leadership approach. For these bosses, displaying vulnerability is considered a sign of weakness. This emotional detachment creates a sense of distance and disengagement among their followers.

Often found in engineering and scientific fields, these leaders need to recognise that vulnerability is not a weakness but rather an appealing and humanising quality.

Pope Francis is a great example of a leader who tried to bridge the distance between himself and his followers. Unlike his predecessor, Joseph Ratzinger, he has made himself a man of the people by making bold strategic decisions that break with tradition and expressing himself with candour and authenticity.

2. The controller

Leaders who try to control results drive their people hard, their ambitions fuelled by a desire for personal glory rather than just business success. They are soon exposed as self-oriented or even narcissistic, which can quickly alienate followers and lead to disengagement and attrition.

Controlling leaders need to understand that they cannot micromanage outcomes – they can only influence them. This can only be achieved if there is a deep understanding of the context and if personal relationships are nurtured through continuous dialogue with followers. This leadership style is prevalent in startups, where the need to bring other experienced minds into the conversation becomes increasingly apparent as growth plateaus. Such a change can be construed as a threat to their ego.

The classic example of this archetype is Steve Jobs. While he created a world-beating, enduring enterprise, it was allegedly painful to work with him. Jobs had an obsession for detail that often triggered outbursts of rage when things were mishandled. Having put everything into work, his dying regret was that he did not spend enough time with his daughter.

3. The complier

The compliant leader spends much of their time managing “up” and “kicking down”. This is largely driven by the tyranny of choice and the fear of making a hard decision that may erode their informal power.

Faced with a difficult decision, many leaders are fully aware of the right course, yet they often go the opposite way or choose an easier path. Why? In the pursuit of maintaining peace and adhering to instructions, a complying leader is reluctant to jeopardise relationships, especially with higher-ups. This can lead to confusion, suppressed conflicts and a lack of clarity among those lower in the hierarchy.

Often seen in younger executives and leaders, this mindset can be overcome by learning how to have “courageous conversations” without the need for them to escalate into conflicts. In the words of hedge fund billionaire Ray Dalio: “The greatest tragedy of mankind comes from the inability of people to have thoughtful disagreement to find out what’s true.”

Lead, don’t manage

When we are stuck in these mindsets, it is often because we are blindly managing rather than leading – we mistake productivity for true leadership activity. We spend our days in endless meetings, replying to emails, sending out instructions and formulating processes.

Strangely, this is a form of work avoidance. The true job of a leader is to deal with the big thorny issues, often strategic in nature, that demand not just the leader's attention but also the collective effort of the group. While it feels deeply satisfying to do all of the former, it can be anxiety-inducing to step into the latter.

So how do we move from being “bad” managers to true leaders? The first step is accepting the need for accelerated development. As David Brooks writes in his book *The Road to Character*: “We need to learn to wrestle with our original sin.”

Seek feedback, don’t avoid it

Every meeting with a direct report should include an implicit invitation to discuss what each is doing well and what needs to improve. This may feel awkward at first, but it will deepen the connection between leader and follower, creating a moment of authenticity. Done regularly, it will change the culture of the organisation and encourage leaders across the

organisation and lower down the hierarchy to do the same.

An executive coach can be extremely helpful in moving leaders forward, especially when combined with a 360-feedback system or interviews. Organisations with a strong feedback culture are healthy both psychologically and financially.

Dedicate time for introspection and self-evaluation

While it can sometimes be unpleasant to look in the mirror, by doing so you get to see the unvarnished truth. Leaders who are not deeply familiar with their inner workings, motivations and drivers are more likely to sleepwalk through their careers and leave a trail of destruction in their wake.

Few leaders pause to ponder their core values, and more importantly, whether these values align with those of the enterprises they represent. Yet, this alignment is the key to unlocking higher productivity, happier employees, and ultimately, a more powerful leadership presence.

Re-engage your curiosity

Create more opportunities for learning and developing by actively engaging in conversations with mentors or experienced individuals and reading outside the realm of your immediate business to ignite creativity. Embark on deeper personal development endeavours beyond the confines of your organisation.

Taking a moment for silent introspection, in the form of daily journaling or meditation, is a way to expand the brain's muscle and gain perspective. Padmasree Warrior, previously CTO at Cisco and Motorola, meditates every day for 20 minutes. No matter how busy we are, there is always time to step back if we so desire.

Seeking feedback, introspecting and staying curious also have secondary benefits for leaders: they help avoid burnout. Paradoxically, burnout does not necessarily appear when we are too busy, it tends to arise when we find ourselves on a psychological plateau and are no longer stimulated or stretched. For leaders, 2024 should be the year to lean into a newfound leadership capability for the benefit of themselves and their organisations.

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