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Bad Boss

Skills and Professional Development



Have you ever wondered why so much time is spent in this column talking about personal development, self-awareness, and self-management? The answer is simple, but possibly painful: Employees don't leave companies, they leave managers.

People at their core want to be appreciated, recognized, and rewarded for their contributions. They want opportunities to grow, contribute, and give. When they work for a boss who fails to provide those opportunities, they will leave the organization.

Of course, employees are responsible for their own growth and happiness, both personally and professionally. However, they need a partner on the professional side. And that partner should be — you guessed it — you!

A manager who is committed to a professional partnership makes a difference in the development of his or her employees and the organization's workplace happiness. In return, the employees reward their boss with engagement and contributions.

Being available and of value to other people is the role of a leader. Contrary to popular opinion in many organizations, leadership isn't about holding power, but giving power. Oddly enough, the more you cede power, the more you get in return. It's not just power that is gained, but also control, time, energy, and productivity.

Before I continue, I want to preface this with two caveats: You must have the right people in the right positions, and when people are in the wrong job, you must do something to fix the situation. This comes down to hiring, onboarding, training, mentoring, and coaching. And when absolutely necessary — firing.

Too often, leaders feel threatened by those they lead, believing that the accolades and achievements of their subordinates should go to them instead. Furthermore, these leaders don't want to take responsibility for the failures of their teams and are quick to toss team members under the bus, whether outright or in subtle and covert ways. If this is the type of environment you have created, you can be assured it is only a matter of time before your staff either leave your organization or you see a dramatic drop in productivity as they begin to disengage.

The good news is that neither outcome is inevitable if you choose to understand your role as a leader and make any changes necessary to become the kind of leader for whom people want to work.

The first step is taking an honest look in the mirror. How do you interact with those you lead? This is probably the most difficult step because it may reveal some characteristics about yourself that are difficult to confront. Self-preservation will likely get in the way, and you'll find yourself justifying your actions. After all, no one wants to face the fact that they are part of the problem. It's much easier to blame what isn't going well on someone else.

But the truth of the matter, in anything that isn't going well, regardless of what else is or may be wrong, the blame always has to lie with ourselves. We have to be the ones to take responsibility, simply because we cannot control anyone else's attitude or behavior. And as leaders, we have to be the ones to set the example of change and progress.

Once we've taken that first step of introspection, however painful, we can then chart a course to improve our leadership. Too often we expect employees to remain motivated, particularly those who are naturally so. They will, but not necessarily with us or our organization. If we are able to keep the employees we've invested in by making an investment in ourselves, isn't that worth the effort?

Make no mistake, being a good leader is not easy. It's time consuming and labor intensive. Not only are you responsible for your own development, but that of those you lead. And if you lack the support and resources from those above you, it will be doubly difficult to give to those you lead. Despite having a job to do in addition to your leadership role, you need to create an environment with adequate tools and resources that allows your staff to make mistakes and grow. While there is no guarantee that they won't at some point move on to other opportunities, all you can do is make sure that it is not because of you, a bad boss.

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Whitnie Wiley was a long-time columnist for the *ACC Docket*, where she wrote the *Lead the Way* column for more than seven years. The column provided leadership tips for in-house counsel and others as they pursue their personal and professional goals.