Workplace Culture

‘Taking the Good with the Bad’ Applies to Both Bosses and Employees

Stephanie Stephens

No one is perfect, but working with someone on the “good” end of the spectrum is always preferable. We spend a third of our lives at work, and when it comes to characterizing bosses and employees, the dynamics of those relationships are an undeniable two-way street.

“In a previous independent service organization that I worked for, I attended a meeting with hospital administration reviewing the performance of the biomed department,” recalled Lawrence (Larry) Fiore, CBET, of the Stanford Medical Outpatient Center of Stanford Health Care in Palo Alto, CA. “My name came up for a commendation, and I said, ‘Thank you. I appreciate it.’ Then, my boss piped up and said, ‘It’s nice to see you’ve been recognized for your efforts.’”

However, behind the compliment, Fiore “could see total hate and jealousy in his eyes,” he said. “That felt as if he drove a stake right through me. I thought, ‘He really doesn’t want to see anyone beneath him get recognition.’”

Working for a bad boss is serious business that actually can be hazardous to your health, according to multiple studies. A study presented at the British Psychological Society Annual Conference reported that working for bosses with psychopathic and narcissistic traits can cause employees to become depressed and engage in undesirable behavior at work, and a Swedish study established a link between bad bosses and heart disease in workers. On the lighter side, the subject has provided fodder for a variety of movies and television shows.

Although they haven’t been in a movie, your healthcare technology management (HTM) peers featured in this article could probably write scripts based on their interpersonal experiences—both good and bad. Here, they share their reflections and advice.

Good Boss, Bad Boss

In his book, Good Boss, Bad Boss, author Robert I. Sutton of the Stanford Graduate School of Business wrote: “Bosses matter. Bosses matter because most employees have bosses, are bosses, or play both roles. ... Over 90 percent of employees have at least one boss.”

It’s difficult to talk solely about “good bosses” without talking about their polar opposites in the same breath. But let’s start with the good kind.

According to Fiore, “You can identify a good boss when the team inherits a big project and there’s an insufficient amount of time or resources to do it. That boss is honest about these challenges, but he or she will also roll up their sleeves and work shoulder to shoulder with you in the trenches. They don’t just say, ‘Go make it happen.’”

They may not be the person who’s partying with you, he said, but that’s not important. “You can relate to them; that they are the real deal and are competent,” Fiore added. “They know the industry but are not satisfied with
relying on past experience. A good boss validates what you’re doing and is tactful in correcting your work. He or she has a backbone and the courage to do the right thing for the department.”

“Keys to being a good boss include putting people first, holding them accountable on a regular basis, and being transparent and consistent in messaging and communication,” said Barrett Franklin. With as many as 9,000 indirect reports, he’s the deputy network director of the VA New England Healthcare System in Bedford, MA. “That means I say the same thing behind your back as I would say to your face.”

Like Fiore, Franklin values a boss who “owns it.”

“I remember a particular boss who was approachable, who let us see he was human and that he could own his mistakes,” Franklin said. “People can ‘turn off’ if you try to be infallible.”

If someone on the team makes a mistake, the leader doesn’t throw them under the bus, he said. “A good boss doesn’t take credit for team victories or lay blame for failures.”

Finally, tenure does not necessarily make a good boss. “It doesn’t have anything to do with how many years you’ve done what you do,” Franklin said. “The ability to lead is not related to that.”

### You Can Stay or Go

A great boss gives you unconditional support and trusts you implicitly, said Sue Schade, principal at the health information technology (IT) advisory firm StarBridge Advisors, based in Pawtucket, RI. With more than 30 years in health IT, she’s been a boss and she’s worked for her share.

“When I had a ‘bad boss,’ I didn’t stay,” she said. “That person may micromanage you. When you work at a senior level, someone who does that may undermine you and go around you.”

The best bosses actually care and show it, said Matt Mortensen, PhD, an advanced regulatory specialist at 3M Critical and Chronic Solutions Division in Minneapolis, MN. “They ask what you’re doing, how you like it, and what else you might want to do. They also protect you from unnecessary distractions at levels above you.”

That’s the opposite of being envious. “An exceptional manager will recognize and cultivate your talents and potential, even if it means admitting that your star might be destined to burn brighter than theirs,” said Mortensen.

The “other kind of boss” is someone “who refuses to break with the company line and talk honestly with you,” added Mortensen. “I truly think that all good employees see right through the manager who only gives a rote replay of a message, good or bad, that was passed to them by their superiors.”

### Good Employee, Bad Employee

No one is “born” into the role of boss in a corporate structure. Unless you own the company, you’re generally an employee even if you’re the CEO, who must report to a board of directors.

For Joe Howe, biomedical services manager at Lexington County Health Services District, Inc. in West Columbia, SC, experience has shown him the most desirable characteristics of good employees.

First, they collaborate. “When one team member is struggling, others step in to pick them up,” Howe said. “It is impossible to overcommunicate with the team and its customers, and you have no excuses for not doing it in this connected world.”

Next, according to Howe, they’ll “assume your family member or loved one may be the next person who needs that medical device you are servicing. They will have fun at work, so if you are not having fun doing your job, you may be in the wrong job. They’ll also embrace change since it is about the only constant we have.”

For Mortensen, the distinctions between good and bad employees are clear. “A good employee knows that you are human so you will make mistakes and you don’t have all the answers,” he said. “The good employee knows that the more you can count on him or her, the better advocate you can be.”

No matter where they work, a good employee understands the current situation is not permanent, he said. “So they pursue ambitions for advancement in productive ways.”

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It's Not Always Obvious
A bad employee isn't always overt. “They undermine the efficiency or dynamic of the group, either through a lack of effort or being negative,” Mortensen said. “They can even be extremely proficient at daily tasks, but their attitude or approach can have a noxious effect that reduces an entire team's output. They have no concern for coworkers' working style or personality type and make no accommodations for the sake of the greater good.”

Beware of two types of employee, Fiore advised, with the first being the overeager helper who steals your ideas. “They are looking for opportunities to outshine their colleagues and climb the corporate ladder. Their motives are not in the best interest of patient safety and the team; instead, they are looking to do a coup d'état.”

Also be wary of the overly confident employee, said Fiore. “They manifest an immodest assessment of their abilities and lack discernment in identifying the ramifications of their interventions. For example, say they want to jump right into servicing life support equipment. This really wears out the managers, who have to keep reigning them in to help them understand their limitations.”

It may seem obvious, but the number one worst characteristic of a bad employee is routinely failing to provide deliverables, said Franklin. “They're just not getting the job done by the date promised.”

‘Teach a Man to Fish’
Good employees are proactive, ahead of the game, and “on the spot” when you need them, said Schade. “They are all about accountability and also about ownership. Their first response is, ‘I’ll take care of that.'”

Although she doesn’t want people losing sleep, Schade sees this person as “waking up in the morning concerned about a company issue and thinking, ‘Now who’s going to do something about that?’ That's great, because in large, complex organizations, it's easy to bounce things around instead of seeing who really owns them.”

Memo to the World’s Bosses
Along the way in his clinical engineering career, Shannon DeWolfe, CRES, who works at a hospital in Texas, has developed his own “wish list” for all bosses to consider.

• Communicate. Even when it’s not possible to answer the phone or an email, it’s really helpful to let us know when you received a message. We are all busy, and even if the answer is something maybe we’d rather not hear, “no” is a much better answer than silence. Then, we’ll know how to proceed.

• Follow through. In our last meeting, we all tackled a new agenda item that was a priority. Sometimes we wonder what happened to the high-priority item we addressed the previous week. We all want to do the best job—and finish that job to everyone's specifications.

• Inform us of changes. Change is inevitable, and sometimes we get assigned a job that changes in midstream. We know “stuff happens” and sometimes, unknown to us, our superiors take new actions to achieve those original goals. Meanwhile, we’re working intently to accomplish the original task that’s now become not only redundant but also counterproductive to the end goal.

• Don't wait until the last minute. We were aware of that deadline months ago. It would be more efficient to work steadily toward it or even finish it early. Remember, “the early bird gets the worm.”

• Take action. Making decisions can be rigorous, but in our world where things move quickly, it’s probably best not to discuss possibilities endlessly. Why not eliminate obviously poor choices, pick two or three options to investigate quickly, and choose a course of action and execute it? That takes us from the starting line to the finish line much quicker.
Good employees are willing to help or teach others, in order to contribute to their ongoing development. Citing the parable, “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime,” Franklin said that such selfless actions result in not one but two “fishermen” and therefore double the resources and productivity.

He knows excellent employees not only deliver on time, but ahead of time and under difficult circumstances. “At times you don’t know what can be achieved if you don’t strive for it,” he said. “External pressure can force us to accomplish things we didn’t think we could.”

On a similar note, Fiore said: “A good employee is perceptive about the pressing issues and identifies the priorities of the HTM department and the healthcare organization. He or she is a self-starter.”

Feel Free to Share

Finally, one of the most intolerable employee behaviors is bullying, Schade said, regardless of whether it’s a boss or employee doing it. “With employees, it’s very hard to see firsthand. We hear about reports from people willing to say what’s going on, for after all, those doing it don’t want to do it in front of you.”

A good employee realizes a good boss doesn’t know everything that transpires in the employee culture. “I won’t know if you don’t tell me, so I encourage my employees—in the most discreet and objective way—to tell me what’s going on so I can deal with it,” she said.

Now that you know more about how to better interface with a good or bad boss or employee, you might be surprised to learn that employees leave both good and bad bosses at comparable rates, according to an article in the Harvard Business Review. Nonetheless, striving for increased goodwill in the workplace, by becoming a better boss or employee and helping your boss or employee succeed, can only make work more positive for you, them, your coworkers, and ultimately, the organization as a whole.

References