

# Turning a bad boss into a strong leader

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Some leaders are stuck on struggle street when it comes to managing their people. Here's how HR can guide a bad boss along a path towards success.

We all know a bad boss when we see one. They don't provide a clear vision for their team, are dismissive of their employees' needs or consistently fail to communicate effectively.

Yet somehow – perhaps through technical ability alone (they might be great at grasping new concepts quickly, have excellent problem-solving skills, and know the relevant subject matter like the back of their hand, all of which are important skills to have in a leader's toolkit) – they've risen through the ranks and stepped into a position of leadership.

But as we have long known from an immense body of research, these technical competencies alone aren't enough for leadership success. This has become even more apparent over the last 18 months as companies have navigated the upheaval, uncertainty and constant changes brought on by COVID-19.

*HRM* speaks with Leadership and Workplace Culture Expert, Tammy Tansley, and Jessica Bilston-Gourley, Founder of Positive HR, about how to support a manager who might need a leg up as they adjust to a new leadership role.

## Pinpointing the problem

The CIPD HR Outlook 2016-17 [survey](#) of HR professionals found that almost half of HR believe senior business leaders don't have the requisite people management skills to inspire their employees to perform at their best.

They rated leaders high on technical ability, budgeting and financial management, and operational management, but only one of these skills – budgeting and financial management – was ranked in the top ten leadership skills required to take their company through the next three years.

These findings point to a dearth of people skills among managers, but what does that actually look like on the ground?

“[It might be] expecting [excessive hours](#) or having unreasonable expectations, or having a very limited tolerance for mistakes and for [learning from mistakes](#) – failure is feared rather than mistakes being [treated as] a fact of life,” says Tansley.

She adds that “providing the solution for the team member rather than coaching them to reach their own solution, being black and white in terms of the answer rather than acknowledging that, in some situations, there are shades of grey – especially in situations where the employee has a personal issue that requires a degree of flexibility” are also telltale signs of a leader who might be placing their people well below performance outcomes.

Irrespective of the particular ways it manifests, the team's issues, professional goals and unique needs don't register as a top priority, or be overshadowed by the leader's own ambitions.

“The important aspects of leadership, such as providing a clear direction, motivating the team to meet those directions, and creating an environment in which employees learn, develop and grow are all areas that get little or perfunctory attention.”

## The ripple effects

Very few people, if anyone, respond positively to an environment that prioritises output over people, and a manager's subpar leadership skills are likely to quickly wear their employees down.

“The impact on the team is usually decreased motivation and engagement, less willingness to put in the discretionary effort, and reduced trust, particularly around how the boss deals with them on a personal basis,” says Tansley.

Some team members might pick up the slack to compensate for a leader's underperformance, leading them to express a sense of unfairness if they're not being compensated or recognised for essentially taking on responsibilities that should fall within a leader's domain.

However, it's also possible that everyone is dragged down in the process if a leader's traits feed into, and influence, the employees below them.

“The team often starts to demonstrate dysfunctional behaviour of its own, [mirroring the behaviour](#) that they see,” says Tansley.

“If the boss is rude or dismissive, there is often an [emotional contagion](#) effect where it rubs off on those around the boss and creates an environment in the team where that sort of behaviour is accepted.”

## Scope for change

Leadership skills can be cultivated through careful intervention if the manager is on board with the process and feels motivated to adjust their behaviour.

Here are five tips from Bilston-Gourley and Tansley to keep in mind when trying to shift a manager's behaviour from output-focused to people focused.

- 1. Acknowledge their emotions and frustrations:** “Leaders are juggling multiple priorities and have a lot on their plate, which can be overwhelming. Let them know that you hear and see their challenges,” says Bilston-Gourley.
- 2. Lend a helping hand:** “Assure the leader that you will always be there to advise and support them – even if they don't need your immediate help. But don't be afraid to give your leader respectful and honest feedback too,” says Bilston-Gourley.
- 3. Find their source of motivation:** “Where they're driven by money, not giving a bonus because the “how” they got their job wasn't appropriate,” says Tansley. “If they're driven by their peers and being respected, undertaking a 360 feedback can be effective in starting the change process.”
- 4. Offer to be their sounding board:** “If they are required to have a [difficult conversation](#) with a team member, invite them to role-play first to ensure a productive discussion and positive outcome,” says Bilston-Gourley.
- 5. Offer leadership training and/or coaching:** “It's about creating a workplace environment where emotional intelligence is recognised as being important,” says Tansley. “This may include a leadership capability framework where emotional intelligence is specifically mentioned, or creating leadership programmes where it is explicitly taught. It may also include providing leaders with access to coaches, mentors who have ‘been there, done that and learnt the lessons’, and 360 feedback.”

## The culture piece

A leader's behaviour typically doesn't operate in a vacuum, and it's worth turning your attention towards the company's culture to assess other contributing factors at play.

For example, does the environment emphasise a people-first approach, or is output highlighted as the priority above all else? Do other leaders also shirk responsibility? Or do they fail to provide the team with a clear strategic direction?

“It doesn't work where one manager is told that their behaviour is inappropriate, but they can see examples of other managers also behaving this way who are being promoted or rewarded... [It's] not just a case of do what I say, but also, do what I do,” says Tansley.

“Critically important though is that the whole ‘system’ supports positive behaviour. It's about creating a workplace environment where emotional intelligence is recognised as being important.”