

# An Ethical Choice

## Working for a Toxic Boss

Although we expect much of leaders, rarely do they meet the most basic definitions of effectiveness. A recent Florida State University study of 700 workers revealed that many employees believe their supervisors don't give credit when it's due, gossip about them behind their backs, and don't keep their word. The situation is so bad that for many employees, the study's lead author says, "they don't leave their company, they leave their boss."

Among the findings of the study, the following were reported by participants:

- 39 percent: Their supervisor failed to keep promises.
- 37 percent: Their supervisor failed to give credit when due.
- 31 percent: Their supervisor gave them the "silent treatment" in the past year.
- 27 percent: Their supervisor made negative comments about them to other employees or managers.
- 24 percent: Their supervisor invaded their privacy.
- 23 percent: Their supervisor blames others to cover up mistakes or minimize embarrassment.

Why do companies promote such people into leadership positions? No doubt, there are several answers. However, there are some ways you can deal more effectively with a toxic boss:

1. Empathize, and don't take it personally. This is hard to do. It's difficult to understand how someone can be mean spirited, unprofessional, or even abusive. But if you try to understand your boss's perspective it may help you cope with the behavior more effectively. And realize it's not about you—people who are abusive are almost always that way with others, too.
2. Draw a line. When a behavior is clearly inappropriate or abusive, stand up for yourself. At some point, no job is worth being harassed or abused. And you may find standing up does not cost you your job—it has a good chance of ending, or at least reducing, the poor treatment.
3. Don't sabotage or be vindictive. If you take revenge, you become part of the problem.
4. Be patient and take notes. We're not suggesting a palace coup to unseat your boss—that strategy can go very wrong—but you may find it useful to have notes at your disposal should the boss shine the spotlight on you.

Sources: Based on A. McKee, "Neutralize Your Toxic Boss," Harvard Business School Conversation Starter (January 20, 2009), [blogs.harvardbusiness.org](http://blogs.harvardbusiness.org); "Toxic Bosses: How to Live with the S.O.B." BusinessWeek (August 14, 2008), [www.businessweek.com](http://www.businessweek.com); D. Fost, "Survey Finds Many Workers Mistrust Bosses," San Francisco Chronicle, January 3, 2007, [www.SFGate.com](http://www.SFGate.com); and T. Weiss, "The Narcissistic CEO," Forbes (August 29, 2006); [www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com).

### Class Discussion

Divide the class into groups of 4 to 5 people. Have them discuss any experiences with supervisors in jobs they have held. They should identify characteristics of supervisors they found "good" and those they found "bad." How did a student feel toward the supervisor? Did the experience affect the student in any way? What was the student's reaction to the supervisor in question?

## Myth or Science?

### “Men Make Better Leaders Than Women”

This statement is false. Little evidence supports the belief that men make better leaders than women; indeed, though the differences are small, evidence suggests just the opposite.

The stereotype that men made better leaders assumed they were inherently better skilled for leadership due to having a stronger task focus, lower emotionality, and a greater propensity to be directive. The most recent evidence suggests that while there is a great deal of overlap between males and females in their leadership styles, on average women do have a slight edge over men. A recent review of 45 companies found female leaders were more transformational than males. The authors concluded, “These data attest to the ability of women to perform very well in leadership roles in contemporary organizations.”

Men continue to dominate leadership positions; only 2.6 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs are women. But being chosen as leader is not the same as performing well once selected. Research suggests more individuals prefer male leaders. Given the evidence we’ve reviewed here, those preferences deserve serious reexamination.<sup>i</sup>

#### Teaching Notes

1. Give each student several sheets of “post-it notes” or 3 × 5 cards. Ask each student to write an idea of how he or she is developing leadership experience, or can develop leadership experience while still in school. Each student should try to come up with two to three ideas.
2. When the students have finished, collect the cards and begin by reading an idea and then grouping them on the board under a like category—ask students for help with the categorizations. For example, service organizations, clubs, church, etc. The categories should become apparent as ideas are read.
3. Discussion: Ask how these skills will transfer to being a manager or other positions of responsibility in the future. How might they explain this experience in a job interview? Do they think this experience will help them when looking for a professional position in the future? Why? What have they learned about leadership? What style of leadership do they use? Are some categories more likely to provide leadership skills than others—and if so, do they plan to spend time developing skills in those activities? Which leadership theory seems to make the most “sense” based on their personal experiences and why? Have they experienced stress when participating in a leadership activity and how did it affect their experience? And finally, what have they learned about being a follower?

# Point/CounterPoint

## Leaders Are Born, Not Made

### Point

In the United States, people are socialized to believe they can be whoever they want to be—and that includes being a leader. While that makes for a nice children’s tale (think *The Little Engine That Could*—“I think I can, I think I can”), the world’s affairs and people’s lives are not always wrapped in pretty little packages, and this is one example. Being an effective leader has more to do with what you’re born with than what you do with what you have.

That leaders are born, not made, isn’t a new idea. The Victorian-era historian Thomas Carlyle wrote, “History is nothing but the biography of a few great men.” Although today we should modify this to include women, his point still rings true: Great leaders are what make teams, companies, and even countries great. Can anyone disagree that people like Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt were gifted political leaders? Or that Joan of Arc and George Patton were brilliant and courageous military leaders? Or that Henry Ford, Jack Welch, Steve Jobs, and Rupert Murdoch are gifted business leaders? As one reviewer of the literature put it, “Leaders are not like other people.” These leaders are great leaders because they have the right stuff—stuff the rest of us don’t have, or have in lesser quantities.

If you’re not yet convinced, there is new evidence to support this position. A recent study of several hundred identical twins separated at birth found an amazing correlation in their ascendance into leadership roles. These twins were raised in totally different environments—some rich, some poor, some by educated parents, others by relatively uneducated parents, some in cities, others in small towns. But the researchers found that despite their different environments, each pair of twins had striking similarities in terms of whether they became leaders.

Other research has found that shared environment—being raised in the same household, for example—has very little influence on leadership emergence. Despite what we might like to believe, the evidence is clear: A substantial part of leadership is a product of our genes. If we have the right stuff, we’re destined to be effective leaders. If we have the wrong stuff, we’re unlikely to excel in that role. Leadership cannot be for everyone, and we make a mistake in thinking that everyone is equally capable of being a good leader.<sup>ii</sup>

### CounterPoint

Of course, personal qualities and characteristics matter to leadership, as they do to most other behaviors. But the real key is what you do with what you have.

First, if great leadership were merely the possession of a few key traits—say intelligence and personality—we could simply give people a test and select the most intelligent, extraverted, and conscientious people to be leaders. But that would be a disaster. It helps to have these traits, but leadership is much too complex to be reduced to a simple formula of traits. As smart as Steve Jobs is, there are smarter and more extraverted people out there—thousands of them. That isn’t the essence of what makes him, or political or military leaders, great. It is a combination of factors—upbringing, early business experiences, learning from failure, and driving ambition.

Second, great leaders tell us that the key to their leadership success is not the characteristics they had at birth but what they learned along the way.

Take Warren Buffett, who is admired not only for his investing prowess but also as a leader and boss. Being a great leader, according to Buffett, is a matter of acquiring the right habits. “The chains of habit are too light to be noticed until they are too heavy to be broken,” he says. Buffett argues that characteristics or habits such as intelligence, trustworthiness, and integrity are the most important to leadership—and at least the latter two can be developed. He says, “You need integrity, intelligence and energy to succeed. Integrity is totally a matter of choice—

and it is habit-forming.”

Finally, this focus on “great men and great women” is not very productive. Even if it were true that great leaders were born, it’s a very impractical approach to leadership. People need to believe in something, and one of those things is that they can improve themselves. If we walked around thinking we were just some accumulation of genetic markers and our entire life was just a vessel to play out gene expression, who would want to live that way? People like the optimistic story of *The Little Engine That Could* because we have a choice to think positively (we can become good leaders) or negatively (leaders are predetermined), and it’s better to be positive.

### Teaching Notes

1. Rent a video tape of one of the following movies:
  - *Lawrence of Arabia*
  - *Hoosiers*
  - *12 o’Clock High*
  - *9 to 5*
  - *The Memphis Belle*
  - *Saving Private Ryan*
2. Preview the video and note points where the leadership abilities of the individual are demonstrated.
  - *Lawrence of Arabia*—About 30 minutes into the film, Lawrence convinces the Arabs to cross the desert. Start with his discussion of the idea, and go all the way up to the attack on the coastal city.
  - *Hoosiers*—Show the clip where the coach explains his coaching style to the team, and then go to the end of the movie, when, in the last minute of play during the championship game, the team leader asserts himself.
  - *12 o’Clock High*—Use the clip where General Savage takes over command from chewing out the clerk through his meeting with each member of his new staff. It ends when he asks his adjutant for advice and is rejected.
  - *9 to 5*—Show the clip where Violet leads the other women into the scheme of tying up the boss in his own home. Then show the closing scenes of the film, when she is leading the owner of the company through the firm showing him all the changes that have been made.
  - *The Memphis Belle*—Begin with the plane in flight on its last mission. For the sake of time, stop when the plane finally drops its bombs. This film is especially useful to generate discussion about others besides the formal leader demonstrating leadership.
  - *Saving Private Ryan*—Begin with the patrol searching for Ryan and coming upon the German machine gun nest. Stop after they decide to let the German go. This is an excellent clip for showing leadership with followers also having power (guns) and of followers leading the leader (the soldier who intervenes in the killing of the captive).
3. Ask students to note leadership dimensions, elements, or behaviors as they watch the selected clip.
4. Record on the board those elements the students noted.
5. Lead a discussion as to whether those are traits, behaviors, etc., and whether or not someone could be trained to duplicate them.
6. Does this lead them to agree more with the POINT or COUNTERPOINT position?

### Class Exercise

Separate students into teams. Provide the students with materials to build a small structure. Building sets, blocks, paper cups, and sticks are just a few ideas, but every group must have the same materials. The task will be to build the tallest free-standing structure with the

materials provided in the time permitted. Ten minutes should be the maximum amount of time allowed. Give a two-minute warning as time wraps up.

1. Select a “leader/manager.” The manager is responsible for bringing the group to goal, which is to create a structure. Explain that everyone, except the manager, will get “paid” (for example, a piece of candy). However, the manager will get twice (two pieces of candy) what the group members do if they get to goal or nothing if they do not. The winning group (the group with the tallest structure) will also receive a bonus (for example, two pieces of candy). The winning manager will also receive a bonus of twice the amount (for example, four pieces of candy).
2. Once time has elapsed, select a winner and reward the team members and managers who got their teams to goal. Award the bonuses to the winning team. (If no team can complete the task, you must decide whether or not to allow more time or to repeat the exercise.)
3. Debrief with the students asking them to describe what happened. Did the manager’s attitude change as time drew near? What worked and what did not? What could have helped them to be more successful in completing the task? What was a barrier? Were they satisfied with the result? Would they work for this manager again? Ask the manager how it felt to have the pressure on him or her to perform knowing a bonus was at stake. Did it seem “fair” to be singled out? What would he or she do differently if the exercise were repeated?
4. This exercise is usually fun and creates a lot of noisy activity among the students. However, as time draws to a close, the “managers” often get more autocratic in their decision making as they try to complete the task. Monitor that students are respectful of one another in their remarks.

# International OB

## Cultivating an International Perspective: A Necessity for Leaders

Accounting and consulting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) is serious about expanding the world-view of its up-and-coming leaders. So the company started the Ulysses Program, which sends the company's potential leaders to foreign countries to gain knowledge and experience in cultural diversity.

For example, PwC sent one group of managers on an 8-week consulting assignment in the Namibian outback. Their job? To help village leaders deal with the growing AIDS crisis. Without PowerPoint presentations and e-mail, the managers quickly learned to communicate in a more traditional way—face-to-face. The managers were forced to rely less on quick technologies and more on forging connections by cultivating relationships with diverse clients. By experiencing diversity firsthand at what is perhaps its extreme, PwC hopes that its managers will be better-equipped to handle issues in any culture in which they conduct business. The company says that the program gives its future leaders a broad, international perspective on business issues and makes it more likely that they will find creative, unconventional solutions to complex problems. In addition, participants can realize what they are able to accomplish when they do not have access to their usual resources. In essence, they are forced to become leaders.

The jury is still out on whether the program is effective at increasing the global leadership skills of those who participate. Nevertheless, participants of the Ulysses Program tout its benefits, and other companies have taken notice—Johnson & Johnson and Cisco Systems are just two of several companies that have adopted similar programs.

*Source:* Based on J. Hempel, and S. Porges, "It Takes a Village—And a Consultant," *Business Week*, September 6, 2004, p. 76.

### Teaching Notes

Instructors may wish to engage students in a discussion concerning how leaders are trained to work in other cultures.

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<sup>i</sup> [http://www.usatoday.com/money/companies/management/2009-01-01-women-ceos-increase\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/money/companies/management/2009-01-01-women-ceos-increase_N.htm); A. H. Eagly, "Female Leadership Advantage and Disadvantage: Resolving the Contradictions," *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, March 2007, pp. 1–12; and A. H. Eagly, M. C. Johannesen-Schmidt, and M. L. van Engen, "Transformational, Transactional, and Laissez-Faire Leadership Styles: A Meta-analysis Comparing Women and Men," *Psychological Bulletin*, July 2003, pp. 569–591.  
ENDNOTES

<sup>ii</sup> R. D. Arvey, Z. Zhang, and B. J. Avolio, "Developmental and Genetic Determinants of Leadership Role Occupancy among Women," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, May 2007, pp. 693–706.