

## INTIMIDATING YET SUPPORTIVE SUPERVISORS

# Jekyll-and-Hyde bosses and the impact on staff

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In the Hollywood comedy *Horrible Bosses*, three friends are so harassed by their abusive bosses that they hatch a plot to murder them.

While this is only a movie, part of the reason it played well with audiences is because it resonated strongly with common real-life tensions in the workplace.

In Singapore, last year's National Workplace Happiness Survey put the nation's overall standing at 59 out of 100 — well below the "happy" band of 68. On a positive note, the survey found that interpersonal relations and employees' well-being such as self-efficacy and resilience at the workplace were high.

Nonetheless, there is discontent in the air.

This unhappiness is not only based on issues such as salary or other benefits. It extends more deeply into corporate culture and has much to do with the relationship dynamics between employers and employees within organisations.

In the course of guiding, assisting and providing feedback to employees, some bosses may go over the top and come across as brash, intimidating and unpleasant. Such undermining ways can come about because of poor employee performance.

Such displays of negative supervisory behaviour adversely affect employee health and well-being, resulting in consequences such as emotional exhaustion and depression.

Conversely, many bosses also demonstrate supportive behaviour — helping employees deal with occupational stress and personal issues through encouragement and reassurance. This shows employees that they are cared for and valued.

It is unlikely, however, that a boss is always supportive or always intimidating. Instead, a boss usually has both sides to him or her.

Does it work when a boss who is intimidating, compensate employees with social support?

One would think so, but our study, published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, shows otherwise.

## HELPING EMPLOYEES COPE WITH UNCERTAINTY

We conducted a series of studies, speaking to 1,921 people, to shed light on whether supportive behaviour will compensate or result in even more negative consequences caused by an undermining behaviour. This depends on two employee characteristics — self-esteem and quality of work life.

Quality of work life refers to the extent that employees are satisfied or happy with their jobs and working environment.

For employees with higher self-esteem, an intimidating boss who also shows social support will be able to reduce the effects of job strain and other negative health issues.

On the other hand, if an employee has lower self-esteem, a boss who is both intimidating and supportive may add significantly more job strain, than when an intimidating boss does not

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lend social support.

Similar findings were also observed when we take the employee's quality of work life into account.

Employees with higher quality of work life will benefit from support even when it comes from an intimidating boss. But those with poor quality of work life may find that they are more stressed when their boss is both supportive and intimidating.

Why do having self-esteem and good work life matter in dealing with bosses who are both intimidating and supportive? It boils down to how well an employee can cope with uncertainty.

A Jekyll-and-Hyde type of boss who sends mixed signals is not helpful because he is inconsistent in his supervisory style.

On one hand he is supportive, and yet, on the other hand, he is brash. Employees are not sure what to make of him. Can he be trusted? What are his intentions? This creates an uncertain working environment.

We found that when employees can handle such relational uncertainties that are inadvertently created by their boss, they can potentially benefit from receiving social support from an intimidating boss. Employees with low self-esteem and poor quality of work life, however, cannot manage this uncertainty and suffer.

But not all is lost.

Supervisors can be trained to focus not only on encouraging positive relationships with employees, but also being mindful about behaviour that sends mixed signals. They can be trained to resolve interpersonal conflicts and misunderstandings in a way that does not jeopardise employees' sense of predictability and control.

It is also important to develop training for employees to help them identify and interpret inconsistencies in supervisory behaviour, and to learn effective strategies for man-

aging these. Such strategies include seeking positive reassurance through approaching peers, mentors and even the boss in question.

Some of the ways to help employees feel valued are commendations, promotions and salary increments. These would resolve the uncertainty that they face in the workplace.

In a competitive workplace, uncertainty in boss-supervisee relationships is likely to be the norm, rather than an exception.

As such, work-based practices and interventions to improve employee capability to cope with such uncertainties must be developed.

Human resource leaders can do this by enhancing certain aspects of the employee's quality of work life, such as promoting a sense of community at work, implementing better reward systems, taking action to ensure that fair practices are adopted and that employees share similar goals as the company.

Companies can also direct resources towards enhancing employee self-esteem by providing positive reinforcement, affirmation that the employee is valued and opportunities to demonstrate competence.

Beyond self-esteem and quality of work life, companies can help employees learn to cope by providing opportunities to exert control in the workplace, such as offering flexibility in workplace schedules and enhancing employee autonomy.

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