

The Incredible Shrinking Employee

ERIC STARTED HIS NEW JOB WITH OPTIMISM.

His experience in marketing was exactly what was needed at the small start-up. He was able to quickly tap his Rolodex for the ideal vendor to handle an urgent project.

Disillusion came fast and hit hard. Eric's boss, a driven entrepreneur, kept changing her mind about the specs of the project. One revision became two, then more—all of which, she insisted, the vendor should cover.

Eric was appalled. He'd come from an environment where vendors were treated with civility, if not outright respect. But when he demurred, his boss quickly vented her ire on him. Uncomfortable with emotion in the workplace, Eric clammed up. Day by day, he spoke up a little less, did a little less. His presence shrank to a kind of moral invisibility.

This kind of situation is all too common. Our pressured times magnify all sorts of intense behaviors: brusqueness, impatience, intolerance, rudeness, and the like. The heat of the emotion is magnified by the power of position. But giving vent to such impulses is inherently self-defeating: The boss seeks to prod performance but succeeds merely in throwing workers off balance. For example:

- Larry, the senior vice president of HR and member

of the executive committee of a major chemical company, swept into the room slightly out of breath, emitting virtual sparks of distracted energy. "Sorry I'm late; please go on," he said. David, the program manager in mid-presentation and youngest person in the room, felt his heart leap into his mouth. "Oh my gosh, what am I going to do now?" he thought.

- A newly promoted director of communications of a global consumer company joined a conference call between the firm's newly promoted 36-year-old CFO and two consultants trying to win a small contract. The call didn't go well. Ultimately, the CFO interrupted: "Look, you must understand one thing if you are going to work with me—when I ask a question, I expect you to answer the question I asked, not the one you wanted to answer."

Ouch. Time to crawl under the chair or maybe hang up.

The moment the call ended, the director of communications rang up the consultants. "Wow, my boss just doesn't understand how intimidat-

ing he can be. If you guys think that call was hard, imagine what it's like to go into his office every day!"

- The day was lovely. As the clock ticked toward mid-afternoon, the leadership team of a bank began to take

*"If you can keep
your head when all
about you
Are losing theirs and
blaming it on you...
Yours is the Earth
and everything
that's in it,
And—which is more—
you'll be a
Man my son!"
—Rudyard Kipling*

seats around the conference table. No one wanted to be in that room, on that day, at that resort. Out the window everyone could see the water sparkling invitingly as a few sailboats skittered across the water in the light breeze.

Laurie, the newest member of the senior staff, immediately voiced the mood, directing her comment to the SVP of HR: "I want to be anywhere but here right now. In fact, why did you schedule this on a Sunday? Don't we work hard enough all week to be giving up our free time like this?"

The SVP's eyes narrowed. Brusquely he said, "Laurie, I am surprised that you, of all people, would say something like that."

Laurie's peers averted their eyes. "Oops, public rebuke by the boss; that isn't good," Laurie thought. At the same time it made her mad: All she did was speak what everyone else was thinking, anyway.

● Shortly before her 27th birthday, Betsy stepped up to her first management role: overseeing a staff of 11 (all of them older than she) in writing and producing a trade magazine. One morning, she got up on the wrong side of the bed and came into work glowering and grumbling, tossing off curt hellos on the way to her office. Within 20 minutes, she became aware that staffers who had been smiling were now scowling. Bantering conversations and laughter had stopped. People seemed to be moving more slowly.

"Did I do that?" Betsy wondered. "Did my bad mood infect everyone else? Is that the real power of a manager?"

Yes, yes, and yes. Maintaining the right tone is Job One of the leader.

Even in the best of times, however, the best boss can lose his bearings sometimes. What can help us ride out the rough moments, to hold our own against a bad boss—or even a good boss having a bad day?

The first step is to uncouple problem behavior from positional power. Someone who is spewing out emotion is probably covering up or protecting some sort of underlying insecurity. No matter what the title, think of him as a bully—all threat on the outside, but a cowering kid inside. Or think of him as the Wizard of Oz—projecting an imposing persona while a very ordinary person frantically pulls levers and insists, "Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain."

Remember that the boss is simply a person who, like all of us, can get gripped by unpleasant thoughts. Are the boss's thoughts more "real" because of her position? Certainly not.

Yet under certain circumstances, certain thoughts can *seem* more significant. In Peter Shaffer's *Equus*, the protagonist—a psychiatrist—reflects that certain events become "magnetized" into emotionally charged memories. One by one, they link together until they form a chain, like the bit in a horse's mouth, guiding movement. No one knows why a particular event becomes magnetized and another doesn't, he ponders, or why the same event becomes magnetized for a certain individual but not for another.

For example, two teams that approached similar projects from different vantage points were brought together to discuss areas of conflict. The debate got loud. At its conclusion, one of the team leaders

felt exhilarated by the open exchange of viewpoints and saw exciting possibilities for new understanding. But the other team leader felt exhausted and fretful.

What magnetizes a shared event into personal memory? The thoughts and feelings we attach to the event. We are, in innocence, choosing to create the bit in our own mouths. The problem is that we don't see ourselves doing it.

With this perspective, it's easier for us to take our thoughts a little more lightly. This helps us focus on the real work or issue. We're able to lend confidence to our teammates—and even to the boss who has temporarily lost it. Of course, when we experience someone "losing it," we may intellectually understand and respect that they are just exhibiting insecure thinking. But it can be hard not to lose our own mental tranquility in the face of an off-balance person—just as it can be hard to keep calm when we are having upsetting thoughts ourselves.

For more on this subject, look into the children's classic, *There's a Nightmare in My Closet*, by Mercer Mayer. ■

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