



UNDERSTANDING AND COPING WITH DIFFICULT MANAGERS.

By; Nicholas Pollice

Overview:

I have conducted countless management workshops in my professional life for various clients and the question that continuously is asked during the workshop is, “how do I manage my manager”? I hear such comments as, “my manager should attend this workshop” or, “my manager requires this workshop badly”.

Unfortunately, the participants who are saying these comments are not alone in their frustration. Based on my calculations, previous experiences and reading data based networks, approximately twenty eight per cent of all working Canadians believe that they work for a good manager; thirty eight per cent say they would fire their manager if they could; four per cent would have their manager assessed by a psychologist and thirty per cent would send their manager to management training.

No doubt, many people are a victim of circumstance and wind up working for a manager who is weak and ineffective. We don't often choose the manager we work for and we do not have to fall victim to their short comings. It is important to realize that we cannot control or change our manager but, we can control and change the way we interact with them.

It is true that some managers are just plain bad people. They have no respect for others nor do they respect their professional environment or the company they work for. These managers are miserable and their values evil; as a result, they don't respect themselves. Although these types of managers are few and far between, you may work for a manager like this. Should this be the case, there is virtually nothing that you can do about it. Accept the fact that this is the situation and make a decision to stay or leave.

On the hand, most difficult managers are not aware of the fact that they are difficult. They actually think they are good managers setting good examples of leadership. Understanding why and how your manager has gone off track may help you choose the best strategy for working with him or her.

Here Are Seven Reasons Why Managers Are Difficult:

Micro management

Some managers have been embarrassed by someone's poor performance in the past and they are determined not to let this happen again. As a result, they are involved in every detail and decision that takes place in the business unit usually confusing results with activities. This is compounded when the manager's boss expects him or her to micro manage the daily activities of the business unit. Micro managing leads to ineffective time and priority management skills and eventually disconnects the boss from subordinates.

In over their heads

Many difficult managers have been promoted to their current position because of their technical skills, their good attendance record, their willingness to work extra hours or their friendly non threatening relationship with their boss. Critical management skills such as organizational skills, leadership skills and decision making skills are given little or no consideration, resulting in an ineffective and at times a burdensome manager.

Management by numbers

Too many managers have been trained to manage by numbers. They are firmly committed to letting the budget manage them rather than take the initiative to manage the budget. These managers make all decisions solely based on the numbers regardless of the collateral damage in the workplace. People are disposable balance sheet items that are expected to get the job completed within the pre determined financial parameters.

Bad boss mentor syndrome

Most difficult managers learn at the feet of the master and unfortunately were promoted to their current position by the master. Mentored by bad examples, they in turn mimicked the same behaviours. The master has taught them the art of micro management, management by numbers and the take no prisoner approach by being rudely blunt and talking down to subordinates.

Overworked

Difficult managers all have one thing in common; they are fire fighters. Not only do they micro manage they are in the thick of many confrontations leaving little or no time to be proactive and get the job done. This can be disastrous for a difficult manager because s/he begins to work harder; not smarter, they push harder on their people to get the job done and become intolerant to mistakes. They are ineffective because they are ill equipped to deal with the pressures that today's business opportunities bring causing their lack of leadership and analytical skills to become evident. There is little or no time for professional development as training may be seen as a sign of personal weakness or a luxury that the manager or subordinates cannot afford or don't require.

Poor communicators

In the world of information technology many leaders feel compelled to increase communication through the utilization of email, high speed internet and black berry's. Difficult managers tend to over use these methods by sending off emails to address challenges that should be addressed face to face or, at the very least over the telephone. To carry the problem further, some have reverted to conducting performance evaluations via email in order to reduce time constraints that have been caused by being overworked. The more connected a difficult manager gets to the information highway the more disconnected and disoriented become the subordinates.

Selective feedback

Many difficult managers surround themselves with "yes" people. People who tell them they are doing well when their performance is terrible. Since they are apt to surround themselves with people that exemplify their behaviour, they really don't know that their performance is less than satisfactory. They intentionally or unintentionally choke off open and honest feedback and believe they are doing a good job because, no one has told them differently.

Strategies For Coping With A Difficult Manager:

You cannot manage something that you cannot control. Many of us have tried to manage our personal relationships and we have found that we are worse off in comparison to when we started. If you can control something then, you can manage it. Difficult managers are much the same. They cannot be managed because they cannot be controlled. We can cope with but, not control a difficult manager.

Here are seven strategies you might consider when coping with a difficult manager.

Support your manager

Do not, under any circumstance put down or bad mouth your manager in front of subordinates, peers or other managers. This is known as mutiny and the consequence of such can be severe. Ensure that your manager gets an abundance of credit for the work that you have done, even if s/he doesn't deserve it. In all your tasks, make sure that you cater to their strengths and be quick to play down or avoid their weaknesses.

Be an initiator

You have heard the saying, "it is better to beg forgiveness than ask for permission". The same can be said when dealing with a difficult manager. Establish your top goals and objectives (four to six is very manageable), get your manager's input, adjust accordingly and make it happen. Keep your manager informed on a regular basis and reset priorities only when absolutely necessary. Difficult managers will leave you alone because they are over matched and you are the least of their challenges. They may even view you as being a star performer because you are the least of their challenges.

Crash manage priorities

If you are a star performer, sooner or later your manager will come to you with urgent matters. When s/he does, pull out your previously agreed upon list and ask what items are to be moved or rearranged in order to accommodate the request. Focus your energy on those items that you can control and cautiously select those elements that you believe you can influence.

See the political landscape for what it is

Everything in business is political except politics, that's personal. Learn how to play the political game by determining who the players are and how the game is played. Remember, organizational politics is a function of responsibility, accountability, authority and influence and, it is part of the organizational landscape. If you have more than one person working in your organization ; you have politics. Politics pervades our daily working life. That means building strategic relationships with others that might include personal trust and professional networks. The key is to remember 30% of people are doers, 50% are fence sitters and 20% are naysayers. Work with the 30% because these are the people who are willing to move ahead and make things happen.

Be credible

The biggest intangible you have to deliver your boss is your credibility. Do what you say you are going to do, do it with passion, professionalism and exceed expectations. Never under deliver, over promise or compromise your commitments to others. Credibility will establish leadership potential and keep you in good stead with the manager and others.

Timing is everything

You must be patient and wait for the right time to approach your manager. Are they more receptive in the morning or afternoon? Is s/he more receptive to one on one conversations, team meetings or carefully worded proposals? Many times they are going to have bad encounters with others and this is usually accompanied with negative consequences. It's a good idea to anticipate these encounters and never approach him / her afterwards.

Don't be a victim of circumstance

Remember, you cannot manage those things that you cannot control and you cannot control your manager. Always be building professional relationships within the organization with your peers, your manager's peers and other business unit leaders. Your best strategy to not becoming a victim is having a well planned exit strategy.

About The Author.

The "Managers Coach", Nicholas Pollice is President of The Pollice Management Consulting Group located in Ancaster, Ontario, Canada. An international presenter and consultant, he is known as a leader in operations management. Nicholas conducts programs in leadership, supervision and management and has been a consultant since 1989. Author of several management and leadership publications, his presentations have been consistently ranked in the top10 %. See Nicholas' bio, his other publications and services on the PMCG. Website at www.pollicemanagement.com

May, 2005.