

ATN Business Sense
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During our challenging economic times many businesses have let go people and appointed new bosses.

It is possible for good bosses to be mistakenly labelled as bad. Manzoni and Barsoux, writing in the summer 2009 MIT Sloan Management Review report that subordinates sometimes make it extremely difficult for their bosses to be good leaders. They note that the boss may walk in pre-labelled. That can occur if they have previously been mis-managed. Also, they can sometimes be negatively affected by the reputation of predecessors. With frequently changing bosses, team members can lose faith and be reluctant to re-engage as they do not want to “be disappointed yet again.”

Subordinates can misconstrue the actions of their bosses. They look out for how their boss behaves, what he or she says or does not say and who they spend time with. The close attention they pay can cause subordinates to make too much of casual comments.

People’s attention is guided by their expectations. When people are tired or under pressure it is not surprising they “notice instances when the boss interferes or speaks abrasively, but pay much less attention when the boss acts in a more empowering fashion.” Manzoni and Barsoux observe that subordinates make “negative inferences about boss behaviour.” Also, a single strained relationship can spread, like cancer, throughout a team. In time, even subordinates who try to maintain a more balanced view can get caught up in a general negative mood.

The research by Manzoni and Barsoux showed bosses must be mindful of and explicitly manage their own labelling, expectations and biases. They identified four important steps to be taken by new bosses; the first being aware of what they are walking into in both business and human terms. “Prior to taking charge, bosses must find out whether there is a perceived need for change in their organization and, if so, how widely shared is that view.” Incoming bosses need to figure out where they stand. A frank question and answer session is important.

The second step is to invest early in subordinates. They need to understand them, get to know them and establish rapport. That will reassure employees that they will be respected as individuals even if their performance falls short. It helps decrease anxiety and defensiveness.

The third step is to be mindful of one’s own behaviour. “Managers need to establish and maintain a positive goodwill balance with their subordinates both individually and collectively.” Otherwise early errors can be very damaging.

Finally, when bosses feel they are not getting the credit they deserve from subordinates or sense that some are not engaging they have to act. Some subordinates will be more marked by past experiences than others and may take longer to come

around. Bosses must remember to give subordinates a real, fair chance to connect and must realize that cannot be instantaneous. Bosses must act quickly. If a subordinate is doing something inappropriate the employee needs to be told sooner rather than later. To procrastinate is unfair to both. Bosses also should check to ensure their initial reaction is right.

Subordinates are not blameless or powerless victims. Bosses must try to understand the personal contexts they walk into before getting sucked into a vicious circle with one or more subordinates.

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