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You Can't Blame Your Failure on the Fact that Your Boss is Stupid

By *Patty Azzarello*
CEO Azzarello Group, Inc.

Let me count the ways.....

I have been hearing about and observing "bad boss" stories for many years and have amassed quite a selection of stupid things bosses do, and ways they find to get in the way of your creating success for them.

If you are in this situation, you must find a way to overcome it. You can't simply fail because your boss is getting in the way. No one will accept that as a reason you didn't deliver. Sadly, this is not a rare situation.

I certainly won't try to cover all of them here, but I've noticed a few "super categories" that many specific boss-annoyances fit into

- ✦ **Micromanaging**
- ✦ **Saying bad things**
- ✦ **Not making decisions**
- ✦ **Being generally incompetent**
- ✦ **Low integrity**

Before delving into any of these, let's cover a few ground rules.

1. Do your job well & deliver -- no matter what (including having a bad boss)
2. Your job is defined by what your boss says it is, even if you think your boss is wrong and that's not the most useful thing you think you could be doing.
3. You can't win against your boss.
4. Anything you say to your boss's boss about your boss (or to the board about a CEO) will get back to them with your name on it within 30 minutes.

So before you put your job on the line, or just decide to suck it up indefinitely, here are three techniques for creating success anyway, that you can think about, and try to apply in your situation.

- ✦ Focus on the desired outcome
- ✦ Consider giving feedback directly
- ✦ Find a way around

Focus on the Desired Outcome

Stupid Boss Behavior #1 Being micromanaged.

Let's take the example of being micromanaged. It feels like crap. If your boss wants to see lots of details and intermediate steps and to direct them, this isn't good for you, for him, or for the organization. It takes too much time.

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Ready, Set, Stall...

Try to stop this dead in its tracks by using the following conversation:

1. 1) Can we agree on what the desired outcome is for this project?
2. Be as clear as possible. Include date, costs and what the world looks like when this outcome is achieved, who's involved, what's happening, what people are saying, what the outputs and benefits are?
3. The simple act of shifting this activities based discussion to one of outcomes will feel better instantly.
4. Do you believe that it is my job to deliver this outcome to you?
5. If Yes, Does it matter to you which specific activities I perform to get there? Do you need to track and measure all the steps in the process?
6. If yes, Why? Is it that you don't trust me to get you the outcome? Or do you think we have defined the outcome wrong?
7. Either answer needs to be talked about.

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Consider Giving Feedback Directly

It's hard giving feedback to your boss, especially if you have a difficult boss. But it can work, and I've even had experiences where it was embraced and the situation got much better.

Some people go through their careers and never get feedback on their bad behaviors. I used to resent the fact that it was my job to do it, but then I realized that it ultimately made my life easier.

There is a way to do it which makes it easier on both of you, and gets results.

1. **Focus on observable behaviors only.** If you have a boss who is micromanaging say: I have noticed that when we have meetings you ask a lot of questions about this type of activity, and often request more data at a detailed level.
2. **Discuss the practical impact of that behavior.** When you ask me these detailed questions about how I am doing what I am doing, it takes a lot of time.

Then follow-up on getting you all the additional data you want takes time away from actually delivering the result. I am spending X time per/week on getting you more data instead of doing the job.

3. **Discuss the emotional impact of that behavior.** When that happens, I need to spend even more time trying to explain to my team why we are delivering the extra data vs. making progress on the work.

I end up feeling like you don't trust me to deliver the result I committed to. This feels bad.

Notice how this discussion builds from observable facts. This is **much better**

approach than saying "it really upsets me when you micromanage me". If you start there, it is an outright attack, puts your boss on the defensive, and doesn't leave room for much productive discussion.

By building the discussion from facts, you can conclude by saying something like. If I commit to deliver this outcome, **can we create some additional outcome-oriented measures** on a timeline between now and the end of the project that will make you feel comfortable that progress is being made?

Here's another example

Stupid behavior #2 Saying bad things

If you have a boss who has a tendency to "say bad things" in public, here is the same discussion approach for that situation:

1. I noticed that in this all hands meeting or in this press meeting you said that you didn't understand the value of this [particular thing]. (Your role, your key project, etc.)
2. The impact of this is that I have had to answer 37 phone calls and emails from across the organization questioning whether or not you support this project or my role. This has taken about half a week of my time away from getting the work done.
3. This also makes me feel that my role is not valued. If that is indeed the case can we talk about it?

The outright attack version might sound something like: **Why don't you support what I'm doing?**

After the constructive conversation you can move the discussion to the request of, When you are discussing this area in public forums, I would appreciate it if you could say[then script something constructive]. This is hard to say no to.

I can tell you that as an executive I have made the mistake of letting something casual slip that has had this type of impact. The reason is that sometimes as leader of a very large organization, you don't always know everything that is going on in your organization at every point in time.

What you think is an inconsequential comment can go right to the heart of someone's livelihood. When someone scripts something for you to offer a comment of appreciation or acknowledgment, it becomes an easy and pleasant task to do it.

Now there are bosses that genuinely don't support some roles and projects and don't have the sense to deal with it privately.

These are the more difficult situations, but that's when this approach is most crucial. I know. I've needed to do it. **It's your job to step up to stopping the negative energy.**

Stupid Behavior #3 Not Making Decisions

Festering indecision can create huge road blocks to your ability to do your job. But

remember, even if your boss is doing this, he and everyone else is still looking at you to deliver. You need to find a way around.

Find some parts of the foundation that you know to be solid and build on them. I've been in always-changing and confusing environments, and if you just sit down with some close teammates and have a session on **"what do we know for sure". This can help a lot.**

Also, the focus on the desired outcome can help here too. Lot's of uncertainty is often associated with the "how". Are we going to cut resources? Are we going to make an acquisition or not?

Move the focus to outcomes: We need to get more customer references, we need to solidify our position with the media, we need to complete the development of a quality product...

At that point you can **find ways to move forward no matter how much uncertainty** or shifting there is around you.

Stupid Behavior #4 - Generally Incompetent

This one can be an opportunity in disguise. In some of my other writings I talk about "making your own experiences". **An incompetent boss leaves a lot of white space.**

While he may torture you on a frequent basis, a boss's flat spots leave room for you to step in and get experience working at a higher level.

Two cautions:

1. Do your current job well no matter what - before taking on more.
2. Use some finesse with your boss when you take on the white space. Don't offend him (I'll do this because you're really bad at it) ... or do it without telling him.

Make sure you give him a way to be comfortable with it and approve it. "Would it be helpful to you if I were to solve this problem, I know you need to focus on other things right now? Here is a specific proposal of something that I could do...."

Stupid Behavior #5 Low Integrity

This is the hardest one to deal with. If you have a set of values which is being damaged by a boss who's integrity is suspect, my only advice is to stand your ground on your values. It's just not worth it to do otherwise.

But since you can't win against your boss, if he asks you do to something directly that is in conflict with your values, you need to find a way to do what is right without making it a contest.

Again, focusing on the desired outcome is important. **Can you think of a different, acceptable way to achieve that same outcome?**

It's also important to have your personal desired outcome in clear focus. I stayed in a role with a very difficult boss because I knew that the experience I was getting in the job was great for getting my longer term desired outcome. (Though integrity was not

an issue here)

I've also been in a situation where I loved my boss, loved my team and my job, but I knew that this job was no longer serving my long term desired outcome so it was time to leave the happy place for a more challenging assignment.

So if you have difficult boss:

- ✦ **First understand if this job is helping or hurting you in terms of achieving your desired outcomes.**
- ✦ **If it's helping, then find a way to get your job done.**
- ✦ **Sometimes you just need to extract yourself from a bad situation entirely:**
- ✦ **Especially if there is an integrity issue, or**
- ✦ **The job is not serving your desired outcome**

You can take some comfort in the fact that many have gone before you in surviving a stupid boss!

But remember it's up to you to decide your course and find a way to get the right outcome for the business and yourself.

Patty was the youngest person to become a general manager at Hewlett Packard at the age of 33. She ran a \$1B global software business at the age of 35, and she became a CEO for the first time at the age of 38. A few of her roles were the VP and General Manager of HP OpenView, CEO of Euclid Software, and Chief Marketing Officer for Siebel Systems.

Patty is the CEO of Azzarello Group, www.AzzarelloGroup.com a unique leadership development organization focused on helping business leaders actually get done what they want to do, and get a bigger payoff from their hard work. Azzarello Group delivers practical, experience-based tools to business leaders, through products and services including articles, e-books, mentoring programs, executive coaching, public speaking, small business retreats, and business execution workshops.

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