

# practical solutions

*Bad boss? Well, it is better to be feared than it is to be loved. Or is it?*

At some point in our careers, most of us will experience the boss from hell – easily angered, defensive, distrusting, and, given the right circumstances, destructive. And, as we log into Workopolis for the n<sup>th</sup> time, we may wonder how our boss got to be so bad. Was there too much Machiavelli in their morning latte? Or is it something deeper?

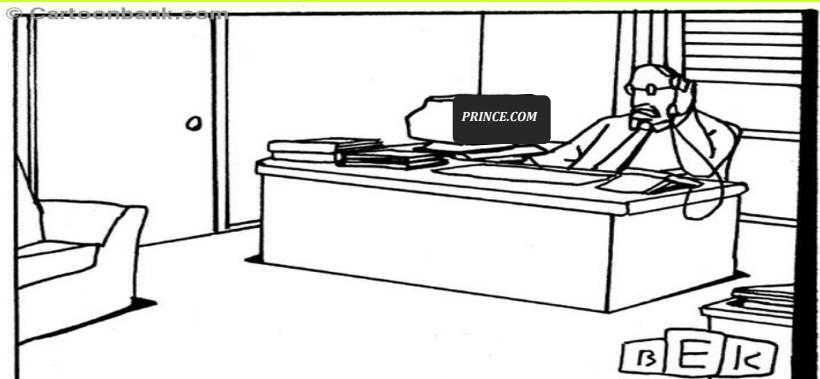
According to Albert and Horowitz (2009), the workplace is also a social environment in which our interpersonal behaviour reflects how we view other people. If we have a positive view and see other people as supportive, friendly and caring, we should be more inclined to protect our relationships by treating people fairly. Conversely, if we see others negatively, (e.g. cold, self-centred and uncaring), we may tend to be more self-interested and far less likely to protect our relationships by treating others well.

*“Before all else, be armed.”  
– Machiavelli*

What does all this have to do with your boss’s bad behaviour? In their study, Albert and Horowitz used attachment theory to explore how well, or ethically, managers behave at work, based on a four-category model of adult attachment patterns developed by Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991). The model, which crosses self image and images of others, either negative or positive, with four possible attachment styles, is illustrated below:

Attachment styles: Bartholomew & Horowitz

		view of self	
		positive	negative
view of others	positive	secure	preoccupied
	negative	dismissing avoidant	fearful avoidant



*“I think Machiavelli was right – a man who wants to act virtuously in every way necessarily comes to grief among so many who are not virtuous. In other words, when it comes to leadership, fear is more effective than love. Bowlby? I’ll tweet that and get back to you.”*

Based on this four-category model, Albert and Horowitz hypothesized that a manager with a preoccupied or secure attachment style and a positive image of others should exhibit stronger ethical values and treat people better than a boss with a dismissive or fearful attachment style and a negative image of others. Their study of 227 managers in Chennai, India, asked respondents to self-report on “What I believe” and “What I do” based on 17 scenarios with potential for unethical behaviour.

The attachment effect was significant both for dismissing avoidant men and women, who reported the most readiness to transgress on their beliefs across the 17 scenarios. For women, only the dismissing avoidant group were more willing to transgress than women in any of the other three attachment style groups. With male respondents, fearful avoidant men also showed a greater willingness to transgress, while preoccupied and secure men were similarly unlikely to transgress.

Interestingly, all of the attachment groups, regardless of gender, were equally likely to act in a manner consistent with their beliefs, whether ethical or unethical, with the exception of the fearful avoidant group who, even though they found the unethical behaviours acceptable, would not act. Are they afraid of being caught in the act? It’s a distinct possibility.

At the end of the workday, do bad bosses matter? Do good bosses make a difference? Apparently they do. A recent American internet survey of 250 full-time employees examined the influence of a manager’s leadership behaviour on employee perceptions of ethical climate as well as employee job satisfaction and corporate loyalty (Neubert, Carlson, Kacmar, Roberts and Chonko, 2009). When a boss was considered to be ethical (e.g. fair, honest, trustworthy and considerate), employees had a more positive view of their employer and an increased corporate commitment. Importantly, these positive perceptions are stronger in highly interactive workplaces, those where the bosses “walk the talk”.

*How bad (or good) is your boss?  
Check out this online quiz and survival tips at: <http://www.badbosses.net/>*

It’s not surprising that secure, confident people with a positive view both of themselves and their teams make the best bosses, or that good (and bad) bosses do matter, not only to their direct reports, but to their corporate cultures. It would be interesting to study bosses with their teams to determine the relationship between attachment styles, image perceptions and the effects on team performance – both within the team itself and within their corporations. In the meantime, I’ll be reading Bowlby\* (1973) with my morning brew.

\*John Bowlby was a British psychiatrist and psychoanalyst known for his pioneering work on attachment theory.