

The devil wears a power suit

Ask someone to describe Satan and they'll probably say 'red with horns and a pitchfork' — but a short, balding egomaniac or a terrible communicator in high heels can be far more accurate

Story by Larry Widen

Novelist Pearl S. Buck once said that to find joy in work is to discover the fountain of youth. Yet the stress that many employees feel in today's workplace is causing them to feel older and more run-down than ever before. So what's causing all this unease? National surveys continue to cite bosses, managers and supervisors as the number one reason why workers come home at night with chronic fatigue syndrome, excess stomach acid, insomnia, and a host of other mental and physical symptoms.

Michael Wierzbicki, Ph.D., an associate professor of psychology at Marquette University, says sometimes people who reach a supervisory level have gotten there because they're competitive, goal-oriented people who are always looking for advantage or opportunity. However, power can corrupt.

"A supervisor will often push to see where the line is, and if they aren't reprimanded, they begin to think the rules of business and ethics don't apply to them," says Wierzbicki.

According to Crystal Schroeder, owner of Brookfield's Elite Human Capital Group, a person in a supervisory position can single-handedly make the difference whether an employee is happy and productive, or disgruntled and inefficient. A boss who takes sole credit for others' ideas can kill employee motivation in no time. Similarly, bosses who berate their workers publicly or fly off the handle at the drop of a hat are going to have difficulty finding good people who want to work for them. Not all scenarios have to have a bad ending, Schroeder says. The easy way out is to slam the door as you leave for the employment agency. But the trick to successful personal and professional growth is recognizing the problem and then coming up with a non-confrontational solution.

Some common problems:

— **Idea thief** — This is the classic credit-taker; a boss who is threatened by the talents of the very people who are there to help him or her. What can you do? "Take some time to cool off, and then ask your boss for a meeting," Schroeder says. "Tell him you were pleased he liked your idea and that you'd like to work with him or her on developing future projects."

— **Public discipliner** — No one likes being called on the carpet in front of their peers. What can you do? "Keeping the tone friendly and pleasant, be direct and say it made you uncomfortable to be personally singled out in front of everyone," Schroeder says. "Tell her you'd really appreciate it if the two of you could discuss any future problems on a one-on-one basis." Schroeder also suggests communicating your willingness to take her suggestions to make the department run more smoothly.

— **Poor communicator** — Schroeder says the key to success is recognizing that your boss has trouble expressing himself. "Get ahead of the situation next time. Don't allow him to hand off some vague instructions and an impossible dead-

line," she says. "Instead, stop in his office and ask a few pertinent questions before taking on the assignment."

Discovering you're working for a person with whom you don't see eye to eye can be painful, says Cary Zigman, director of e-Health Marketing at Covenant Healthcare's Northshore headquarters. He recalled a former employer who was simply impossible to please. "If I'd say 'blue,' he'd say 'green,'" Zigman says. After six months of swimming upstream, he realized that his boss needed to feel like he was always in control. Zigman altered his approach to include his boss in all phases of planning and discussion leading up to any major decision. Although he admits it was a difficult time in his career, Zigman says it's the single best learning experience he's ever had. Now a supervisor himself, he says, "I swore I'd never be that kind of leader. I really listen to everyone's ideas and opinions before we make a move. I will never say 'Do this because I'm your boss.'" ❧

