What to Do if Your Boss Is A Low Performer
Author: Quint Studer

One of the most frequently asked questions that I receive—the one that's at the top of everyone's list—is: "What can I do if my boss is a low performer?"

It's tough enough to confront someone who we supervise about job performance issues...even tougher to have that difficult conversation with a peer, but taking on the boss may seem impossible and even career threatening. Yet, if you're working for a low performer, you likely feel disillusioned and discouraged. Plus you aren't being mentored and developed in the ways you desire. As a result, you pay the price. Your department struggles. The organization may not achieve its goals. And yes, even your boss loses out. After talking with hundreds of staff and leaders who want to push through this barrier, I have some suggestions on what you can do if you feel your boss is a low performer. Try these:

- **Take a look at yourself first.** This means holding up the mirror. Make sure you are doing all you can to run a great department to achieve the desired results. Bosses appreciate someone who provides solutions. Find ways to take things off your bosses' desk rather than piling new things on by pointing out problems with no solutions or ownership. While your boss may not perform the way you wish, you will have a much better discussion about these issues if you are performing well yourself. Reaching out to your employee assistance program is also a good way to make sure other issues are not clouding your perception of the situation.

- **Start with identifying what your boss does that you feel is helpful.** Ask yourself: Does your boss do many things well and a few things poorly? It's easy for a few frustrating behaviors to cloud our judgment and overall view of our boss, in spite of some redeeming qualities. Let your boss know what is working for you first. Remember, recognized behavior gets repeated. An example: "Larry, I appreciate the time you spent with me this morning going over the project list. Your time on this very much helps me prioritize next steps, move more quickly, and achieve outcomes." By telling Larry that you appreciate his time and why, it becomes much more likely that Larry will make time for you next time you ask. Another example: "Larry, I do appreciate your candid feedback on my performance and suggestions for managing expenses better. I'm grateful that you're willing to invest in my professional development by pointing out what I can improve on." Here, we let Larry know we can take candid feedback.

- **Confront the problem.** If you've already looked in the mirror, believe your own performance is consistently strong, and have shown maturity by welcoming potentially negative feedback yourself, you're ready to take the next step with your still low-performing boss. I recommend using a "support-confront-support" technique. Basically, you combine what is working well with what is not. Be sure to emphasize that this is your perception of things. This will help your boss to be a more receptive listener who is less defensive. Example: "Larry, I want to thank you for sharing the strategic plan with me. Your suggestion that I focus on expense management and the implementation tips you offered are really helpful to me. We've already seen a lot of improvement. In fact, department expenses are under budget year-to-date. I also appreciate your support in allowing me to attend the recent
conference. I found it very helpful in improving operations. *(Get ready. Here's comes the "confront" part...)* "You know, this is just my own perception—you may not even realize it—but you just asked me a question and before I had even finished answering, you cut me off rather abruptly. It disappointed me and frankly, I was a little embarrassed. Larry, I believe you genuinely do want to hear what I have to say, so I'd appreciate it if you would take time to listen. As I said, I do very much appreciate the investment you're making in me. It's clear your suggestions are helping me lead change that will allow us to meet our department and organizational goals."

Typically, he or she will respond well to this kind of approach. The key is to start and end with the positives. Always use the words "It's my perception" when you have this kind of discussion. Also, try not to judge your boss too harshly. In my experience, most of the time, your boss is not aware of the full impact of his or her actions on you. This is because all too often, we don't take ownership for having these direct conversations. Instead we vent our frustrations with others who can't really help us in side conversations.

- **Move to DESK.** Okay, so you've tried tips one through three and haven't gotten anywhere. What next? Meet with the boss using the Describe—Evaluate—Show—Know approach.

1. **Begin by D-describing** what actions you have observed that are problematic. "Larry," you say. "Thank you for your time. I would like to share my perception with you about the meeting yesterday. Please listen until I finish what I have to say. Yesterday at the division meeting, you asked me a question, but did not allow me to complete my answer before you said, 'Sounds like we don't know what is going on.'"

2. **Next, move to E-evaluate.** Evaluate how you feel or how your organization's policy, standard, or value is not being lived by your boss' behavior. "Larry, when this happened, I was hurt and embarrassed. I also believe that making that comment and cutting me off mid-sentence is not consistent with our organizational standards regarding respect.

3. **Then move to S-show.** "My goal is to do well here, so I want you to know I can accept negative feedback if it is offered in a professional manner. Since I know we both want to achieve the same goals, I'd like to describe the best way to provide feedback to me. If you have concerns about what I'm saying, for example, just speak to me privately after the meeting and we can address them together then."

4. **Finally, K-know** the consequences. You might say, "Larry, if we cannot work out a way to communicate in a more productive manner, *(then lay out what you are willing to do).* This may not be the right place for me to work right now, and it saddens me for I very much would like it to work out." Remember, you don't have to follow through on quitting, but perhaps you have signaled the importance of resolving this issue. I understand that using the DESK approach is not easy. It takes a lot of courage and persistence. However, I urge you to be brave. Working for someone who drains your energy will impact your health, create issues with your staff, compromise your personal values and high standards, and eventually impact those you love when you take your frustrations home day after day. Life is too short to spend so
much time with a boss or an organization where the fit is not right.

- **Get support when you need it.** It's also true that some behavior crosses the line when it's abusive, harassment, or too volatile to handle alone. In those cases, do reach out to the system your organization has in place and report such actions. Remember to access your company's employee assistance program. They can help you make sure that your perception is accurate and also provide key tips for managing the problem during this stressful time.

In conclusion, my experience is that being a supervisor isn't easy. I just don't think that leaders come to work with hopes of ticking off a few employees and creating conflict with patients and physicians. By taking the lead in resolving conflicts, you demonstrate healthy adult behavior to yourself, your boss, and your organization. If, in the unlikely event that the above tips do not create the right environment, remember that in the long run you will be happier and more successful in a place with a better fit. I suspect though, that in many cases, you might be surprised that your boss is receptive and appreciative of the honest feedback you offer when you address concerns directly. Typically, your working relationship will improve.

*This article was adapted from a blog written by Quint Studer titled, “What to Do if Your Boss is a Low Perfomer.”*