WHY DO BOSSES BEHAVE AS DICTATORS? A SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

BY CHETAN DHRUVE

If you've worked for any length of time, you've almost certainly had a bad boss. A bad boss can blight our existence in a way that no one else can.

The thing is, although bad bosses are a common phenomenon the world over, we still react the same way when we have one. We say, "My boss is bad." The implication is that it's the fault of the individual boss. But since bad bosses are everywhere and have been around practically forever, it's time to address the issue in a radically different manner. We need to ask: "Rather than bosses being individually bad, is there something about the system that automatically produces bad bosses?"

So instead of blaming individuals, let's examine the system. As a reader of *The Systems Thinker*, you're already familiar with systems thinking (ST). But ST has many variants, offshoots, and philosophies. Hence please bear with me while I describe the version of ST I'm going to be using—the version developed by the biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy.

The Bertalanffian System

In this version of ST, a system is defined as an entity that maintains its existence due to the mutual interaction of its parts. The critical part of this definition is the word "interaction"—without the interaction, the entity cannot exist.

Take water as an example. Water is a system—without the interaction between hydrogen and oxygen, water cannot exist. A property of water—liquidity—is termed an "emergent property." This is because water emerges from the interaction of its parts (hydrogen and oxygen). The emergent property of liquidity cannot be found in the constituent parts, which are gases.

It's quite incredible, when you think about it, that a gas interacting with another gas produces a liquid.

What does this have to do with you and your boss? Well, every human relationship is a system, because the existence of a relationship depends on the interaction of its parts (human beings). Since all human relationships are systems, the relationship between you and your boss is also a system. What kind of system is it? To answer this question, let's look at what bosses are called in the workplace.

Bosses in today's organizations are labeled "leaders"—team leader, group leader, project leader, and so on. Presumably this is done so that bosses behave as leaders. But are bosses really leaders? To find out, we first need to define the word "leader."

In the context of interpersonal relationships, there's only one objective definition: A leader is someone's who's elected to lead by those s/he is leading. You can be a tremendous orator, a great visionary, an inspiring figure, a consensus-builder, or whatever. But if you've not been elected, you're not a leader.

Similarly, let's define "dictator." A dictator is someone with power over you, over whom you have no voting rights. Hence, your boss is a dictator by definition. It's important to understand that this is true of all bosses—not just the nasty ones. Further, because your boss is a dictator, you are a subject. And the relationship between you and your boss is a dictatorship system.

What are the emergent properties of a dictatorship system? For the subjects, it's fear. For the dictator, it's the abuse of power. At the workplace, fear doesn't have to be body-shaking terror. It could be something as simple as someone not speaking up in a meeting.

Remember this is an emergent property of the boss-subordinate relationship—the subordinate could be a very assertive person outside of work. Power abuse doesn't mean being nasty; it could be your boss stating, "Any questions?" in a way that means, "I don't want any." Again, this lack of openness is an emergent property—this boss could be perfectly nice and approachable outside of work.

There's more to this dynamic. Sometimes, subordinates do muster up the courage to speak, only to be labeled "whistleblowers." They lose their jobs and have their careers ruined because the dictatorship system hits back with a vengeance. The consequences, while terrible for the individual whistleblower, can be disastrous for organizations too. Take, for example, the recent BP oil spill.

Lessons from the Gulf Crisis

As you know, the Deepwater Horizon oil rig disaster claimed 11 lives and resulted in one of the world's worst-ever oil spills. What went wrong?

There were equipment failures, of course. But the truth is that subordinates who knew about the dangers were pressured into shutting up. An article in *Propublica* says, "[M]anagement flouted safety by neglecting aging equipment, pressured or harassed employees not to report problems, and cut short or delayed inspections in order to reduce production costs. Executives were not held accountable for the failures, and some were promoted despite them." The article adds, "A 2004 inquiry [BP's own] found a pattern of intimidating workers who raised safety or environmental concerns."

But how do workers feel intimidated? Who, exactly, intimidates them?

The answer is, of course, their bosses. Here's an example of how these pressures are exerted and play out in real life, on the ground.

In August 2006, Stuart Sneed, a pipeline safety technician, found a crack in a transit line just five months after a 200,000-gallon oil spill in Prudhoe Bay, Alaska. Because of dangerous sparks from work near the cracked line, Sneed ordered the work to stop. He assumed that his employer would be happy, given that he had flagged a safety issue so soon after a major spill. But rather than being praised, here's what happened to Sneed:

"[I]nstead of receiving compliments for his prudence, Sneed—who had also complained that week that pipeline inspectors were faking their reports—was scolded by his supervisor for stopping the work. According to a report from BP's internal employer arbitrators, Sneed's supervisor, who hadn't inspected the crack himself, said he believed it was superficial.

The next day, according to multiple witness accounts and the report, that supervisor singled out Sneed and harassed him at a morning staff briefing. Within a couple of hours, the supervisor sent emails to colleagues soliciting complaints or safety concerns that would justify Sneed's firing. Two weeks later, after a trumped up safety infraction, he was gone."

In other words, Sneed's boss eliminated the messenger of bad news— precisely the fate of dissenters in dictatorships. Moreover, whistleblowers are usually shunned by the job market. It's incredible: people who should be re-hired in a jiffy have doors slammed shut in their faces. Why is this? Because every organization is a dictatorship, and dictatorships do not like dissenters.

In May of this year, Sneed wrote in the comments section of a *Propubica* article: "I stood up and told the truth about BP and their fraudulent careless programs at Greater Prudhoe Bay. My intentions were not to attack BP as a company, only to expose safety issues that if not corrected would surely cost them and the people working for them much harm. Their way of thanking me on two separate occasions, years apart, was only to make sure I was blacklisted and that I would never work again in the Alaskan Oilfields."

This July, an article in *The New York Times* stated, "A confidential survey of workers on the Deepwater Horizon in the weeks before the oil rig exploded showed that many of them were concerned about safety practices and feared reprisals if they reported mistakes or other problems." A worker was quoted as saying, "The company is always using fear tactics. All these games and your mind gets tired."

The reality is that fear is present in all organizations, not just BP. But we have a mistaken notion that a culture of fear is deliberately fostered by managers, when in fact fear is an emergent property of the workplace dictatorship system. As a result, tragedies have happened time and again. Often, these disasters are blamed on the lack of a "safety culture" in organizations, most notably NASA for the Challenger and Columbia accidents.

However, when you delve deep into the investigation reports of such cases, you inevitably find that a safety culture is absolutely not lacking. Far from it. Experts lower down the organization hierarchy always know when safety is being endangered. But their expertise is disregarded and trampled upon in pursuit of "higher" organizational goals such as profit or politics.

Redesigning Our Organizations for Freedom

It's not that we're unaware of these issues. Hence, all kinds of efforts are made at "empowering" employees— whistleblower legislation, leadership training, assertiveness training, seemingly flat hierarchies, and anything else you might care to throw at the problem. But all these efforts have failed and will continue to fail, because the system hasn't changed. To change the behavior of people, we need to change the system.

So how do we get subordinates to behave freely, and bosses to behave as real leaders, not dictators? The answer is quite simple: We need to redesign our organizations so that the emergent property of the system is freedom. And the way to do that is to give subordinates the right to vote for their bosses.

If you have all kinds of reservations about this apparently insane idea, let me end by asking: Would you like to have the right to vote for your boss? Would it change the way you conduct yourself in the workplace? ◨

This piece originally appeared as a two-part series on the *Leverage Points* blog. **Click here** to add your comments.

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