

Seven Habits of Pointy-Haired Bosses

Stephen R Balzac

Scott Adams, of Dilbert fame, routinely features tales of bumbling managers. The popularity of Dilbert, and the degree to which it resonates with people, are a testament to his accuracy; indeed, Dilbert's pointy-haired boss has become an iconic figure. Dilbert aside, however, I have observed that very few leaders intentionally act like the pointy-haired boss depicted in the comic strip. Rather, they engage in pointy-haired behaviors without realizing the effect they are having on the organization as whole. Let's explore some examples of such behaviors and their unintended consequences.

1. Pointy-haired bosses break their own rules and figure either no one will notice or no one will mind because they are in charge. In one company, the CEO called everyone together to talk about the importance of really working hard and putting personal needs to one side in order to ship a product. At the end of the talk, he announced he was leaving for a two week vacation in Hawaii and wished everyone good luck. This did not go over well. One vice-president, who had apparently not been warned, almost choked on his coffee. When the CEO came back, two people had quit and the rest were up in arms.

2. The pointy-haired boss believes that he is separate from the group he leads. In fact, leaders are also group members, with a very important and well-defined role. Through their actions, leaders set the norms for their group. For example, the manager of a team at a large software company imposed a \$.25 penalty for being late to meetings. When he was subsequently late himself, the team gleefully

demanded he pay up. After a brief stunned moment, he tossed a quarter into the pot. No one complained about the fine after that. What the leader does is directly mirrored in the organization. When leaders find that employees are not living up to the standards of the organization, they often need to look in a mirror and see what example they are setting.

3. Pointy-haired bosses fail to recognize the culture they are creating. To be fair, it's hard to see your own culture from the inside, and despite what many managers and CEOs believe, culture is formed not

from what you say but from what you do. As MIT's Ed Schein observes, "Culture is the residue of success: success in dealing with external challenges and success in internal advancement." What behaviors are successful in the organization? What behaviors are rewarded? The very behaviors that people tell me they want to change are frequently the ones they are encouraging.

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4. Pointy-haired bosses lack an understanding of group/team dynamics. They like to say that their organization is "different," and the research on group dynamics doesn't apply. That's like the people in early 2000 who said about the stock market that "This time, it's different." If you're dealing with people, patterns repeat. It pays to recognize the patterns and understand how they are manifesting in your specific situation.

5. Pointy-haired bosses are often unable or unwilling to create a clear, compelling vision for their organization that gets everyone involved and excited. The best way to attract and retain top talent is to

make people care about what the company is doing. That's best done through painting a vivid picture of the outcome and creating clear goals.

6. Pointy-haired bosses motivate through short-term rewards and/or intimidation. They assume they know what their employees want, rather than taking the time to ask or to observe how people are responding. Short-term rewards and intimidation generate short-term spikes in performance, but build neither loyalty nor the desire to go the extra mile. Unfortunately, far too many people are willing to sacrifice the longer-term performance of their team for a short-term gain. In one company, the head of engineering "motivated" employees by inviting them to join him for happy hour in a bar on Friday nights. Had he asked, he would have realized that what the team wanted on Friday nights was to go home and have dinner with their families. Instead of motivating the team, he made them feel imposed upon.

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7. Pointy-haired bosses do not believe in asking for or accepting help. It's not about asking for help, it's about investing time and money to enable the company to accomplish its goals. The boss's time is a resource; skilled leaders invest their time and the time and money of their business where that will produce the best return. Sometimes the best return is obtained by investing in an employee, sometimes by investing in a contractor.

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Very few leaders deliberately engage in these Pointy-haired boss behaviors. Rather, their behaviors are the result of their own corporate success story. Therefore, for all that even one or two Pointy-haired boss behaviors can derail an organization, behaviors acknowledged to be counter-productive are very difficult to eradicate. Nevertheless, the ability of a manager or CEO to recognize these failings and invest in changing themselves is the true test of great leadership.



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Building effective development organizations, improving team morale, focus, and enthusiasm, developing effective communications between team members, reducing employee turnover, helping businesses identify and attain strategic targets, and increasing delegation and motivation have been amongst his most successful projects.

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