

MANAGEMENT

Duking it out with bad managers

'Bad apples' often tolerated if they get results, but they're a headache for human resources

WALLACE IMMEN

Managers who bully, are disrespectful or play favourites are a huge problem that many Canadian organizations are willing to turn a blind eye to as long as those leaders get results, according to a new survey.

Of nearly 800 human resources managers surveyed, 73 per cent said they spend a significant part of their time dealing with problems caused by bad managers. But 35 per cent said their organization will tolerate just about anything from a problem manager who achieves results, the survey by the Human Resources Professionals Association (HRPA) and the industry journal Canadian HR Reporter found.

The most common issue was inappropriate comments to employees, which 74 per cent of HR managers have seen in their organizations. Favouritism came next at 70 per cent. Treating employees with disrespect was cited by 62 per cent, and 57 per cent mentioned bullying or intimidation.

"I was surprised at the high proportion of managers that are seen to be 'problem managers' by HR professionals," said Claude Balthazard, HRPA's director of human resources excellence. "I'd like to hope it is not a growing issue, but no one has asked this question before."

It's not a glamorous part of the job, but HR professionals are often called upon to clean up the messes left behind by less-than-competent or less-than-ethical managers, Mr. Balthazard said.

"Problem managers fall into different camps. "There are managers who are poorly trained or promoted to management for the wrong reasons, and there are those managers whose values and attitudes are at odds with that of the organization. Management training can prove to be useful for the first group, but is not helpful for the 'bad apples'

out there," he said.

There were also differences of opinion when it comes to levels of seniority. Below the middle-management level, 81 per cent thought problem managers were either a big or huge problem

whereas at the middle-management or executive levels, 67 per cent thought problem managers were either a big or huge problem.

It's important to intervene early and not let issues fester, said Lianne Landry, a senior HR manager in Halifax, who estimates about 30 to 40 per cent of her time at work is spent either cleaning up after problem managers or coaching them. The bulk of problems, about 70 per cent, are due to the inexperience of new managers, she said.

Rookies who make mistakes often don't recognize that they are creating issues and generally respond to coaching. "It's a matter of being proactive and getting in front of new people early to support them, so they recognize mistakes and don't repeat them," she said.

"Problems that are left too long become infections and like any infection they can negatively affect others and ultimately lead to resignations," she said. "In this market, we can't risk tolerating problem managers' behaviour at any level, because we are facing an issue of talent retention as the economy improves."

Many respondents commented that problem managers have a strong impact on employee engagement, turnover and the bottom line; and that it does not take many bad managers to have serious morale consequences. Others noted that the incidence of problem managers may be underreported because employees are fearful of reprisals, and that issues can go undetected for a long time until problems "blow up."

The survey was done as a fol-

low-up to a previous survey on the increasing litigiousness of employees. It suggested employees may well be more litigious than they used to be, but that some employers also have cultures that tolerate managerial misbehaviour, Mr. Balthazard said.

"The key is not to just point out the negative consequences of problem behaviour, but rather to convince the problem managers that their results will be better if they change their ways," he said.

ARMCHAIR CEO

What would you do better than your employer's current leader if you had the chance?

A new survey found that if they could become chief executive officer, many employees say they would spend more time getting to know their troops.

The survey of 2,009 Canadians for online job site Monster.ca also asked people to vote on who they think would be the ideal CEO - with 28 per cent choosing U.S. President Barack Obama. Well-known Canadians Don Cherry, David Suzuki and William Shatner each drew about 11 per cent of votes.

But on the more serious issue of what people think CEOs should be doing more of, 33 per cent recommended



that the top boss should spend more time in the trenches getting to know what employees do day to day. Levelling the pay scale was also popular with 17 per cent, who recommend that the CEO should try for a month to make do with what the average employee gets paid.

Over all, 75 per cent said if they were CEO, they would try to improve communication between managers and staff, 63 per cent said they would improve benefits for all employees and 61 per cent said they'd offer more flexible working hours.

Other ideas favoured by at least half were increasing wages, increasing vacation allowances and making the company more environmen-

tally friendly.

"This is a fun survey, with a serious intent. While Canadians chose Obama as the ultimate CEO, they also asked for their own CEO to spend more time working alongside them," said Monster Canada's senior vice-president of international sales and general manager Peter Gilfillan.

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TALLYING BEHAVIOUR

46

Percentage of human resource managers who said problem managers are a "big" concern.

27

Percentage who said they are a "huge" problem.

53

Percentage who said they have "difficult conversations" with a problem manager at least once a month.

17

Percentage who said they were effective "always" or "most of the time" in dealing with managerial misbehaviour.

Source: Survey by *Human Resources Professionals Association and Canadian HR Reporter*



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