

Boss-Employee Relationship Effects Bottom Line, Expert Says

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Many believe the top reasons employees quit their jobs stem from an unreasonable workload, unacceptable work hours or low pay. However, according to a recent survey conducted by VitalSmarts, a provider of training services and products, these are actually the least common causes. The study found that more than 50 percent of survey respondents said a disagreeable boss was their number-one reason for leaving their workplaces. In fact, two out of every three people frustrated with their boss are looking for other opportunities.

According to Joseph Grenny, president of VitalSmarts and co-author of "Crucial Confrontations: Tools for Resolving Broken Promises, Violated Expectations and Bad Behavior," employees often quit not merely because of an unpleasant boss, but also due to their unwillingness to voice concerns with their boss.

"We found two out of three people will quit and leave without ever having expressed their concerns with their boss. And the big irony of this is that a lot of people are worried to confront their boss because they think that they might lose their job," Grenny said. "So instead they quit their jobs. (They) go through all the trouble and inconvenience of trying to find a new position rather than ever attempt to speak up."

The survey also found that only one in five respondents attempted to explain their concerns with their boss. Because employees fear that speaking their minds will amplify their already-strained boss-employee relationships, bar them from opportunities or, even worse, get them fired, many employees also refrain from communicating their concerns to their co-workers or direct reports, Grenny said.

"The startling fact is that people are just as unlikely to confront a peer as they are a boss," Grenny said. "They are just as unlikely to confront a neighbor as they are a boss. And so when you really start looking at how people tend to avoid crucial confrontations, you realize that it is a pervasive pattern, and what we are doing with our boss is giving us an excuse for not holding the crucial confrontations by virtue of the fact that they have more authority than we do."

Grenny said that this fear does not stem from self-confidence issues, but from the fact that a large part of the population feels incompetent and incapable of confronting people. So what can an organization do to remedy this incompetence?

According to Grenny, employees and bosses shouldn't avoid crucial confrontations, but welcome them. And, yes, that may be easier said than done. An organization must possess an environment where communication can fly.

"The number-one thing that bosses need to do in a tight labor market to make sure they reduce turnover and retain their best and their brightest is create a climate where their direct reports can hold crucial confrontations and crucial conversations with them," Grenny said. "They need to talk literally about anything, no matter how politically or emotionally sensitive it is. If they do that, people then feel connected."

Bosses should publicly praise and acknowledge people who are candid with them, they should find the opinion leaders in the organization and build a strong rapport with them, and they need to continuously hold conversations with people. But Grenny said it is not only the employer's responsibility to cultivate a climate where open communication is embraced. The entire workforce needs to support it and ensure that the boss feels comfortable as well.

“A boss needs to know as much as any other employee needs to know that you care about their interests, that you want them to succeed, that you respect them, that you really do care about them looking good and performing well,” he said. “And when bosses really believe that of their staff, they start to relax and give many more degrees of freedom in speaking candidly with them.”

But speaking candidly requires sensitivity. Abrasive and unrelenting language will only further frustrations and continue to drive a wedge between individuals. Criticism is difficult for most individuals to receive. However, if the conversation begins on a positive note, listeners will be more receptive, Grenny said.

“This isn’t about ripping on people: It is about solving a problem,” Grenny said. “And it is not sugar-coating. You are going to be very clear about whatever the issue is—whether it is micromanagement, abuse or them not being supportive.”

And if a two-way flow of communication is achieved, organizations can dramatically improve their productivity and bottom line.

“We have seen in hospitals how communication saves lives,” Grenny said. “One hundred and ninety-eight thousand people died this year in hospitals in the United States because of mistakes. Most of those mistakes were predictable and were known to happen regularly by people in the organization, but nobody talked about them. So it improves quality, and we have been able to demonstrate in a variety of organizations that productivity can be boosted between 40 to 80 percent by creating a climate where people can talk about the emotionally and politically risky things that are getting in the way of higher performance.”