

ThinkTank
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Reprinted from :
The Dallas Morning News - 2004

How to Handle an Idiot Boss

Does your boss put the “I” in Idiot? Consultant helps you survive the time spent with clueless managers.

Do you work for an idiot?

By John Hoover's figures, half of us do.

Oops, make that half of you do. My bosses are all Mensa material.

The 51-year-old management consultant is creating a New Year's buzz with his just published *How to Work for an Idiot: Survive & Thrive Without Killing Your Boss*.

"I'm finding that it's a topic that resonates with everyone," said Hoover, an adjunct management faculty member at Aquinas College in Nashville, Tenn., and former midlevel executive with Walt Disney Productions and McGraw-Hill.

Idiot beget idiots in many organizational charts, he said, giving stupid souls power over brighter thinkers like you and me. They surround themselves with like minds to create a "readily available pool of sacrificial lambs if things go wrong."

And when one procreator gets promoted, Hoover said, that "large sucking sound" is fellow idiots moving up, too.

A genius idea: Hoover's book started out as a self-help treatise called "How to Manage People Who Are Smarter, More Talented and Productive Than You Are." But no publisher would touch it, and no idiot would buy it or adhere to its lessons.

So the self-proclaimed "recovering idiot boss" turned the tables on himself and the management dolts he has coached for the last 13 years. The first step is to make certain your boss is truly an 'I-Boss', Hoover's name for



clueless managers who can't see the debilitating effects of their actions.

There are, you see, other problem managers: Gods (self-deified Napoleons), Machiavellians (iron-fisted rulers), Masochistics (failure addicts), Sadistics (pain inflictors), Paranoids (conspiracy hunters) and Buddies (friendly, visionless saps).

Mistake a Machiavellian for an Idiot, for example, and you're doomed, said Hoover. "These are very smart people, shrewd and calculating. The worst thing you can do is stumble into his or her path."

On the brighter side: In the cosmic scheme of bosses, Hoover said, you probably are better off with a more malleable I-Boss. “An idiot who hasn't a clue might actually get a clue.”

He did. But, Hoover said, he will never be completely cured. “I find myself at crossroads daily, and I always have the opportunity to do the intelligent thing or something remarkably stupid.”

When he reaches these junctures, he reminds himself of past mistakes. As a divisional general manager for McGraw-Hill in 1990, he received a self-published paperback that he thought was clever but too pedestrian for a serious psychology book. He felt pretty smug about his decision to pass on it. “Colossally stupid,” he said in retrospect.

Hoover cautions against applying the Idiot label too quickly. What appear to be stupid genes may just be a regular person with idiosyncrasies.

“Idiots have no problem connecting one dot. They can do this all day long if left without adult supervision,” he said. “But God forbid if you ever ask them to consider triangulation. Their heads would explode.”

Playing it smart: Forget the blame game, Hoover advises. It's up to you to improve these toxic relationships.

One tactic is to appear dumber than Mr. or Ms. Dumb. “By adopting the appearance of an idiot, you can move up the organization without threatening anyone,” he said.

A better route is to make your boss think your ideas are his. Learn “idiot speak.”

By that Hoover means find what floats your boss' boat and use that to get your point across. If your superior is a hockey fan, learn about the sport so you can use casual conversation to lead into a productive one.

“For 2004, resolve to accept the boss for whatever she or he is,” Hoover recommends. “If your situation is truly untenable, quit.”

But, he warns, you have a 50-50 shot at simply trading one idiot for another.

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