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Dr. Katrina Burrus, MCC

Why the New Normal Office Culture Can't Have the Same Old Abrasive Boss

New environments beg new leadership styles.

The coronavirus pandemic has changed many workplaces temporarily and others permanently. Working remotely is more common, and for those returning to a physical office, the seating arrangements, meeting protocols, and other dynamics of the pre-pandemic work environment will be different.

But despite the new normal, some employees still will be confronted by the same old abrasive boss. With many workers feeling added stress because of the crisis, bosses who create more tension can make the work environment fragile and far less productive – an especially bad combination during an uncertain time in our economy, says Dr. Katrina Burrus, author of *Managing Brilliant Jerks: How Organizations and Coaches Can Transform Difficult Leaders into Powerful Visionaries* (www.ExcellentExecutiveCoaching.com).

“Abrasive leaders engage in a series of negative behaviors, from harsh criticism to intimidation and manipulation,” Dr. Burrus says. “They may get results but they usually run good employees off, and their effectiveness often has a short shelf-life.

“In these daunting times of major transition, company leaders need to consider the concerns and the value of their employees. Even the most approachable, well-liked leaders will need to make adjustments to best manage their people in a sensitive way while getting maximum performance. Whether leading in a fully virtual work

environment, a reconfigured office or a combination of the two, leaders can't rely solely on what used to work as effective leadership in face-to-face interactions.”

Dr. Burrus offers these tips for leaders of various types to keep in mind in the new work environment:

Be brilliant, not an abrasive jerk. “If a leader's mindset is that his or her employees are inherently lazy and need to be flogged into action, that's how he or she will treat them,” Dr. Burrus says. “That attitude will spread down the chain, poisoning the corporate culture. Organizations need to establish their management and leadership principles as a reference for desired behavior. If they are receptive, abrasive leaders should be offered the

support of a customized coaching program to help them change their destructive behaviors and leverage their strengths. Organization heads should communicate to their abrasive leaders that they are valued but that misbehavior has consequences, which will be applied.”

Reassure and refocus. “When leaders do not see what their employees are doing, as when they are working remotely, this creates anxiety and may trigger the abrasive leader to be even more authoritarian,” Dr. Burrus says. “However, leaders who have high emotional intelligence will likely adapt their leadership to reassure employees, which serves to refocus and motivate them in these uncertain times.”

Use a tracking system. A tracking system is recommended with more

communication. “For example,” Dr. Burrus says, “have a good morning virtual check-in where employees communicate what they intend to achieve during the day/week and a good evening check-out, where they communicate what they have accomplished, what they struggled with and what resolutions they need to find.”

Prioritize adding value. “Remind employees to add value to clients and have more interactions with clients,” Dr. Burrus says. “Clients will remember which providers were present during these uncertain times to support them in getting over their struggles. Make sure employees have systems to stay in contact with their clients.”

Invite more feedback. “Employees and leaders are figuring out their virtual environments and altered office environments through trial and error,” Dr. Burrus says, “so learning what is working well for your employees and sharing that with others can help your organization to adapt more effectively. Likewise, finding out what isn't going well can help leaders adapt their expectations, leadership styles, and interactions with employees to promote effective working relationships and employee well-being.”

“New environments beg new leadership styles,” Dr. Burrus says, “and leaders who adapt to support their employees during these challenging times will experience enhanced employee productivity and wellbeing.”