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Good People, Bad Jobs Situations: A Middle Manager's Dilemma

Scott P. Muir and Jeanne R. Davidson

Abstract

Middle managers play a critical role in successful library operations in both public and academic settings. Their alignment with and their ability to carry out the vision of upper management is critical to moving the organization forward at all levels. The authors offer practical strategies for any middle manager who finds herself in a position where she is not in accord with her boss, situations that can range from uncomfortable to disastrous. They examine a variety of issues and circumstances such as misunderstandings, unanticipated changes in the organization, lack of fit with the organizational culture, different work expectations, and incompatible work styles that lead to conflicts and challenges between the middle manager and her boss. Because the library management literature does not address this area well, the authors suggest approaches for coping, determining possible exit strategies as well as behaviors to avoid. The recommendations are based on reading management literature from a range of other sources and from personal experiences.

Introduction

"Whenever I dwell for any length of time on my own shortcomings, they gradually begin to seem mild, harmless, rather engaging little things, not at all like the glaring defects in other people's characters." - Margaret Halsey

Middle managers are in a unique and challenging position as they lead efforts to fulfill the vision of the Dean, Director or other senior leadership. To be successful in this role, middle managers have to work well with the Dean or Director of the library, having a clear understanding of the major directions and the approaches of the leader. While aspects of this article apply to other librarians, the unique role of the middle manager creates additional challenging situations. Unlike the line librarian, the middle manager's role requires a very close work relationship with the head of the library. The director relies on the middle manager to operationalize her vision, so the middle manager cannot just keep her head down and work on whatever she chooses. The middle manager must actively support and address the director's plans through the leadership and assignments they give to their direct reports. A line librarian can sometimes try to ride things out, believing that the bad boss will leave. Many organizations work around an unengaged or mediocre employee but if the boss views the middle manager as ineffective, it can be a major problem.

In addition to the requisite library and technical skills, good collaboration on personal and professional levels with the Director is critical. Middle managers make decisions with a degree of independence and have influence even though they may not always have complete information from the Director. Ideally, their leadership is moving the library in a direction that furthers the boss' vision. When the relationship between the director and the middle manager is not a good fit, the result can range from uncomfortable to a career disaster. One university library director stated that this lack of a good match between middle managers and the dean/director is one of the most important challenges to leadership and success in our profession (Cawthorne, 2010). The issue of a bad fit between an employee and an organization is not unique to Libraries. Coach Bill Belichick, fired by the owner of the Cleveland Browns, was later named NFL Coach of the Year with the New England Patriots. Oprah Winfrey was told she was unfit for television news. Walt Disney was told he was not creative enough. Whether facing a management mismatch or simply a "bad" boss, talented people may struggle or are fired, yet often go elsewhere and prosper in a new situation.

It could be, as soon as the first day you realize you are in a bad job situation. Other times it may take several months or more, before you realize the challenges cannot be resolved. In any of these situations, your boss will express doubt in your abilities and may indicate that the decision to hire you was a poor one. You dread going to work. Typically, you cannot call the former employer and say, "I have changed my mind I want to come back." So what can you do when caught in this situation?

How Did You Get Here?

Following a history of proven successes and moving up to positions of increased responsibility, each of us envision a new job with optimism and excitement. Yet, sometimes the dream job turns out to be a nightmare. If you are starting at a new institution, you invested considerable time and energy in applying and interviewing for the job, and possibly relocating to a new city or state. Perhaps after arriving at the new job, you discover that you missed the cues about the organizational culture or your boss' work style during your interview. The boss may have understated certain challenges, or may not have stated an expectation clearly. You may have started out on the wrong foot through not understanding or not recognizing the core values (or lack thereof) held by your boss or the organization. Maybe expectations about your role have changed from the time you interviewed or over the time you have been in the position. Alternately, your boss might leave, be replaced with someone new or you moved up in the organization and now report to someone new. You, as the middle manager, must learn to work with the new person. Any of these job situations can feel unworkable and seemingly unchangeable.

Organizational Culture Mismatch

Early in your tenure in the new job, especially if you are new to the organization, it is important to listen carefully with the goal of understanding the culture of the organization and of the individuals with whom you will interact. In most situations, the head of the library is expecting you as the middle manager to implement their vision for the library. Before starting any change process, however, you first need to understand fully the culture in which you are working as well as the changes expected by your boss. Making real change is difficult but can be an even greater challenge to overcome once the organization is in turmoil. Make sure you are in tune with your boss and her expectations and work/leadership styles.

Middle managers can find themselves stuck between the wishes of the leader and the desires of the staff. Sometimes both can be talking “at” the middle manager with complaints about the other, rather than engaging in a conversation that clarifies understanding and provides opportunities for agreement and progress. In these kinds of difficult situations, the middle manager must develop strategies to extricate herself at the very least and, if possible, improve the dialog between the two factions. Unfortunately, an ineffective leader is not likely to support attempts to improve communication. The ineffective leader prefers to hide behind the middle manager.

You may discover that the organization is highly dysfunctional because of a history of poor management, a lack of overall direction, or incompatible value systems between the director and the staff. Perhaps the organization contains employees who believe they know what is best and have no interest in cooperating with anyone, especially not with administration. These situations can create an environment where your performance seems poor and you are continually frustrated. Your boss may not have the coping skills to address the problems, or the leadership skills to develop strategies to resolve the overall dysfunction.

Alternately, the organization may be struggling with conflicting commitments and vision. In this scenario, everyone is plagued with impossible deadlines and outcomes and a lack of resources to accomplish their responsibilities. In this case, your boss may be unavailable to work with you because of the pressures of her own work situation.

Incompatible Work Styles

“Bad” bosses are actually quite common. In her research in the area of satisfaction with one’s boss, psychologist and author Michelle McQuaid found that nearly two thirds of workers in the United States would prefer a new boss instead of a raise. She also notes, “75% of the workforce reports that their immediate supervisor is the most stressful part of their job.” (McQuaid, 2012, p. 15) A primary factor leading to increased stress levels is a basic incompatibility between your work style and your boss’ leadership style. Poor leadership is the number one cause of middle manager dissatisfaction (National Institute for Occupational & Health, 1999).

Leadership styles range from transformational leaders who motivate and energize their employees and provide resources as needed to laissez faire leaders who provide minimal support and are largely absent (Kuhnert, 1994) to toxic bosses that create an overall atmosphere of hopelessness or despair. Many bosses will fall somewhere between these extremes. What makes a boss toxic varies and what is toxic to one person may be less so to another. For example, she may be totally self-absorbed and only focused on what is best for her, regardless of what is good for the organization or for you. She is busy building an empire or preparing for her next coveted position. The boss might be focused on the goals of the organization or her own personal goals but not willing or able to focus on the people whose help is critical to achieving those goals. You might have a boss who is dishonest and misleads direct reports and upper management about progress and the true state of the library. Your boss may take credit for other people's work claiming it as her own. Your boss may be all too willing to blame you or others for her failures, throwing you or someone else under the proverbial bus.

Less toxic but still problematic, your boss might be a good person at heart, but is over her head in the job, is fearful of taking action, or is technically incompetent. In this difficult situation, the boss cannot cope with her own challenges, let alone assist you. Your boss may quite simply be lazy and prefer to rest on past laurels and offer nothing new to the organization. In this case, can you manage up, and help your boss be more successful? Trying to develop strategies to build a productive relationship will benefit you (Hill & Lineback, 2011).

Change of Expectations

Sometimes things have changed since you interviewed or received the job offer, for example, budget cuts, policy changes, or changes of direction issued by administrators above the level of your boss. You find that promises are not kept or can no longer be delivered. A new leader at the top of the organization, such as a new president, mayor, or board, may have very different expectations that conflict with your vision and the values that initially attracted you to the job. Sometimes you will find you have been intentionally lied to or misled. The position turns out not to be what you expected. Without a promise in writing in your job offer or contract, your best option could be a serious and respectful conversation with your boss about the promises not kept.

Cases might arise where management has unrealistic expectations about how much time is necessary to make a change. Your boss may expect you to make what seems to be an overnight cultural change in a unit, fixing years of past practice and/or mismanagement. The mandate for rapid change can be coming from your boss, or at a level above that. Reorganizations can also become a plague if your job duties and expectations change and are no longer in an area of your strengths.

Often you will find yourself stunned that things are going badly. A person who is typically successful will find an impossible situation or an outright failure difficult to comprehend and may not know what to do next. Feeling the boss does not like you or does not respect your

work and finds you less than competent can be very hurtful and demoralizing. It is vital that you determine what options you have and identify personal strategies for coping with the situation.

What Can You Do?

Handling the Current Situation

A critical step in assessing your current situation is to determine whether you have exhausted all avenues to address the problems. Do you understand the true causes of the problems as opposed to the superficial symptoms? Many issues in the workplace arise from communication breakdowns – not enough, not the right kind or in the right setting, or from misunderstandings based on inaccurate assumptions (Maravelas, 2005; Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2012). Have you asked your boss to clarify her concerns or her vision at a more detailed level that could lead to an improved understanding of her expectations? Have you planned and held honest conversations with your boss about the realities you are facing and the shortcomings of your situation? Have you talked with someone in Human Resources who might provide suggestions or resources for you? For example, perhaps you can find documentation that supports a position that more time is needed for a major organizational change to be successful and discuss options and alternatives for how to proceed. The evidence presented might not lead to your boss' support, but a carefully designed conversation is worth attempting. Consider asking her to allow you to take a different approach or timeline to resolving a challenge, using a strategy more closely aligned with your own work style.

Depending on your boss' work style, explore strategies that allow you to communicate suggestions in ways that support and strengthen her position. Typically, you would share your ideas with her in private, but if necessary to do so in a meeting, should be very carefully worded so as not to embarrass her. Consider whether your boss is *unwilling* to work with you or if she is *unable* to work with you. In the latter situation, can you work with your boss to help her become more effective or look good? Improving the boss' work and image will only benefit you in the end. However, if your boss is insecure, incompetent or unwilling to face the realities of the situation, she may not be receptive to changes, and will perceive your suggestions as threatening.

If you and your boss have conflicting work styles, ultimately you may need to adapt a style that works best for her. As an example, if your boss is highly detailed and has a "just the facts" approach, recognize that she will find a lot of personal chat annoying. Determine what is important to her and her preferred approach to communication. Deliver information and reports to her in that manner. If you are in a situation where the boss changes frequently, you must constantly adapt, start over, and learn the new boss' style.

Develop strategies for avoiding and redirecting the negative conversations endemic to a dysfunctional organization. Continually replaying the problems exacerbates the pervasive negativity making everyone feel miserable and hopeless about the organization. Rather than focusing only on the problems, explore possible solutions, even coming up with far-outside-the-

box ideas to consider. Work with those things that can be changed and consider them in a positive way. Some win-win projects give you successes you can point to as evidence of the effectiveness of your work. If some co-workers persist in being negative, associate with those who are more upbeat and positive. Avoid venting your frustrations at work; instead write them in a private journal.

The time may come when you need to have an honest conversation with your boss about the lack of progress in addressing the problems. By trying to gain a better understanding of your boss' expectations and talking honestly about the places where there are conflicts, you can maintain objectivity and see options more clearly. Be honest with yourself about what you want from the conversation (Patterson, et al). Explore possible solutions such as options for a different position within the organization that removes you from the conflicts with the director or to an area that makes best use of your strengths. If you need or want to stay with the organization, you might ask to be relieved of your middle management duties and become a line librarian. If you have already decided you need to leave, the conversation might focus on eliciting assistance with your exit strategy or on how you can manage until you leave, depending on how open you feel you can be about sharing the plan to leave. Do not overlook the possibility that your current supervisor might be supportive of your desire to change positions, whether internally or by leaving. If your boss also acknowledges the issues as a conflict of styles or approaches, she may be very willing to give you a good reference based on strengths she recognizes in you. She might be glad to help you achieve a graceful exit so she can replace you with someone seen as a better fit for the department or organization. If you are hoping to turn the situation around or possibly stay in another position, the conversation would focus on the work you can do and determining next steps in the transition. It is vital that you always remain outwardly respectful of your boss.

"Sometimes, the company and its culture might be great, but you have the bad luck of working for someone who doesn't have your best interests at heart. Someone, for instance, who is jealous of you, or has low self-esteem and takes that out on you. In my case, I was able to reach out to others in the company, and eventually found a new role working for a different part of the same firm."
Peter Thiel

Take Care of Yourself

A bad job can cause depression and manifest itself in a variety of physical ways. Recent studies show that worry about losing your job, high job demands and low perceived organizational support significantly increase the odds of physician-diagnosed health conditions (Goh, Pfeffer, Zenios, & Rajpal, 2015; Ilies, Dimotakis, & De Pater, 2010) Take good care of your health, exercise, eat right, get enough sleep, and follow doctors' orders. Find an activity outside of work where you can focus your energies and feel successful or more positive. Look for opportunities to practice mindfulness throughout the day, and/or take time to exercise which can help reduce tension and stress. You would not be alone in your unhappiness. Be sure to

talk with your doctor, as needed, for any physical and mental health issues you are experiencing.

Your lack of success can be hard to understand and incredibly frustrating, leading to self-doubt. Although your effectiveness may be limited, do not let a bad job situation make you doubt your skills and strengths. Discussing your situation with someone in Human Resources can help you identify support systems within the organization as well as potential options for additional training. Another strategy is to find a trusted colleague and discuss the situation and potential options. Talk with a mentor, if you are fortunate enough to have one. An experienced friend or mentor can serve as a person to whom you vent your frustration in private, preferably away from the workplace. They can also support you as you ask yourself the hard questions about what comes next, including your possible transition into something else. Take the time to review past successes in other positions and highlight the skills you demonstrated in order to be successful in those positions. Look for those areas in your current position where you can be successful now and focus on them. You can point to them when interviewing for your next job (Hakala-Ausperk, 2011).

Take some time to stretch your skills and find ways to grow professionally. Explore whether or not your technical and management skills need strengthening. This additional learning can give you a new focus and provide a sense of satisfaction. Continue to learn about library management or management in general by talking with other managers, attending conferences and professional workshops and by reading professional literature. This strategy is reinforced by the idea that the best leaders are the best learners (Hakala-Ausperk, 2011; Kouzes & Posner, 2010). At conferences and workshops you can increase your networking opportunities in case you need to move to a new position.

Time to Leave

“If you find your own values are misaligned with the organization, you should definitely leave. I had one job where this happened to me — and as soon as I realized it, I knew I had to quit as quickly as I could. If my values and my ideas of service are compromised, I can’t sleep, so I have to go.” Peter Thiel

Once you recognize that you are in a position that does not fit and is unchangeable, your next step requires answers to a number of questions. Can you afford to retire or quit? Can you find another job elsewhere? Can you take a leave of absence or become a stay at home spouse/partner? Can you return to school and gain new skills? Ask yourself not only *can* you do these things, but also do you *want* to do any of them.

Another possible outcome is you are fired, your contract is not renewed or you will not be receiving tenure. Perhaps they ask you to resign or advise you they will put you under a microscope and then find a way to fire you. If you think that termination is a very real possibility, consider the preemptive approach of leaving. The old adage states that people do not leave jobs, they leave their bosses. Leaving an unsatisfactory job, in some ways, firing your boss, can

be very empowering. Rather than waiting for things to get worse, develop your own exit strategy, on your own schedule. For those people who are feeling very damaged and beaten up by a boss, quitting the current job can be the beginning of the healing process.

“As I look back on my life, I realize that every time I thought I was being rejected from something good, I was actually being re-directed to something better.”

Steve Maraboli

Interviewing For a New Job

When you can leave your current situation, applying for a new job may be the best option. As you think about a new job, be sure to identify what it is that you are truly seeking, and what you want to avoid, especially in reflecting on the challenges of the unsatisfactory position. As you approach the conversation about your current circumstances with a potential new employer, first, describe your current situation as a management mismatch or a conflict of work styles or values. If an interviewer asks for more details be open, but avoid blame, criticism or negativity. For example, you could say, “My manager and I have very different ideas about how to approach a situation, or very different ideas about the time required to address a certain task.” Describe your successful contributions in your position and explain that you are ready for the new challenges and opportunities provided by this new position. Identify colleagues who can speak to your skills and abilities and to the challenges you encountered and use them as references. You want your references to be very professional in their comments to any future employers, so consider discussing your approach with them in advance.

The interview can be particularly awkward if you were removed from the middle manager position or if you were terminated. Regardless of the circumstances, be honest about your changed situation. You can say something to the effect, “I decided to leave my position at the library in order to focus all of my time in seeking a new position.” Or, “my supervisor and I agreed it is in the best interests of the library that I take another role within this organization where I can direct my talents in a productive way.” Do not try to mislead or deceive a potential new employer about your current work status. If a potential new employer finds out you lied, you will look bad. Although it may be uncomfortable or embarrassing, a potential new employer will respect you for the honest response. Develop a clear inventory of your strengths, skills and accomplishments as you approach an interview so you have concrete examples to discuss.

During the interview ask many questions and carefully explore this boss and the organizational culture overall. You will want to understand how your performance and successes will be evaluated. What is this boss’ preferred way of working and communicating with you? Does she want regularly scheduled meetings or discussions “as needed”? Ask questions about the potential new boss’ approach to decision-making and problem solving so you have an idea of what you might expect. Ask similar questions of the boss and of other groups you interview with during the interview process. Are the answers congruent or are there discrepancies that you should look into further? Determine how the answers to these questions fit with what works best for you. In addition, if you know people who have worked with this boss

or at this organization before, contact them to get their impressions of the overall culture and the leader's style. You want to avoid ending up in a job that is equally bad or even worse for you, thereby avoiding that proverbial frying pan into the fire. In the negotiation process, try to get promises and agreements in writing, if possible.

As you reflect on next steps, consider whether this is a good time to change the direction of your career or change careers altogether. You may realize that your boss is not the only source of your frustration; your career focus may not be as satisfactory to you as it once was. If you have been working in one area of library work, you might want to try a different aspect, e.g. moving from reference into access services, or moving into a different type of library, e.g. from academic into public or corporate. Perhaps you want to pursue a different type of work such as consulting, working for a vendor, or moving your career and life in a whole new direction such as starting your own business or pursuing that inner passion as a new career (Kouzes & Posner, 2010).

What Not To Do

In difficult situations, where emotions are high, one is not always at one's best. Try to practice mindfulness to stay in better control and avoid these negative actions. Avoid lashing out or going on the attack when feeling hurt or angry as this is generally a losing strategy. Be cautious of going to battle with your boss because you most likely will lose. In most situations, your boss has the support of senior administration. You might even find yourself fired immediately. Avoid complaining about your management in meetings, in public situations, or in email. Your comments could get back to your management and it will make a bad situation much worse. You should never, under any circumstances, post negative comments about an employer or a bad job situation on social media, even after you have left that organization. Your posting is too easily and unpredictably shared or taken out of context. A future employer might consider you a malcontent or be afraid that you will post negative comments about them as well.

Although it may be difficult, it is vital that you avoid being outwardly defensive, angry, or casting blame. Do not focus your anger and frustration on your co-workers and subordinates. They likely are not to blame and you may wish to use them as references. Although they may be a part of the problem by undermining you, or failing to do quality work, outward hostility toward them will still be a losing strategy. Even if you can prove that point to your boss, she may determine that you should have handled these employees better.

Choosing to ignore all the signs that you may be terminated is not wise. If you are preparing for an alternative, you will have considered available options, if indeed, you are fired. While you may see your current job as short-term, you still want to be as effective as possible. Slacking off increases the likelihood of incurring the ongoing wrath of your boss thereby hastening a potential termination. Not doing your job also undermines your credibility with co-workers whose support you may be counting on for references. Continue to show that you can be effective in some areas and can offer creative solutions and ideas to the organization.

Conclusion

At some point, six months to a year after the situation has changed or you have moved on to a new opportunity, take a critical look at what happened. Examining the situation objectively can be difficult to do when under stress, so the passage of time can provide some distance to allow for a more thoughtful consideration. You can do this with a colleague or mentor, or independently. Consider what clues you missed, what opportunities and approaches you should have tried. In most cases where there is a bad management mismatch, your performance was not your best. Ongoing self-reflection will be valuable to your personal and professional development. Think about those things you could have done differently, but acknowledge the realities about what was not changeable, regardless of the skills you have. Continuing to talk down about your former boss or employer will slow down your ability to move forward. Keep in mind that you are not the first person to fail this way and you will get through this transition.

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