

# Leading Through Difficulty: The Darker Side of Workplace Behavior

Book Excerpt

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# ABUSIVE SUPERVISION

## STORYTIME

### THERE IS SOMETHING WRONG WITH MY MANAGER

George was a monster of a manager. He had no issues ridiculing employees, invading privacy, reminding individuals of their past mistakes, breaking promises, lying, being rude, or projecting blame on others to neutralize perceptions that his own shortcomings played a role in the litany of organizational difficulties. In the words of today's youth, "George had no chill." He would say things to people that would incite violence if said in a non-work environment. Pete, one of George's former employees, described George as "the living embodiment of Lucifer."

George, Pete explained, would whisper things to people in passing that would cause an immediate negative reaction. The day Pete was escorted out by security was attributed to a negative interaction with George. According to Pete, while he was walking into the bathroom and George was walking out, George said, "Aren't you going into the wrong bathroom you little bi\*\*\*?" Pete snapped. He grabbed George by the throat, threw him up against the wall, and began choking him – at work – while other people were looking. Someone notified security and a few minutes later, Pete was being walked out while George, according to others who witnessed the incident, was laughing and saying, "I told you."

That isolated incident was not the first time that George said something that Pete deemed disrespectful. A few weeks prior to the choking incident, George told Pete that "he sure would like to have some alone time with his (Pete's) wife. Pete responded in kind, but was not pleased with the interaction. The little bi\*\*\* comment sent him over the edge. Could Pete have responded differently? Yes. Should he have even been in such situations in which a manager acted so abusively? No. While Pete's situation is likely extreme, abusive supervision abounds within the workplace.

## THE WORST MANAGER IN THE HISTORY OF MANAGERS

Indulge me as I share another story of abusive supervision. Karen worked for a woman whom she described as “arguably the worst manager in the history of managers.” Karen explained her abusive supervision experiences and they were nothing short of a living nightmare.

During a staff meeting, Karen reflected that she offered a few comments about a new process improvement that could enhance the delivery process. After she finished her thoughts, her manager asked her, in the presence of other people, “Are you really that dumb or did you simply make such ignorant suggestions to add some comic relief to the meeting?” Angered by her manager’s comments, she went to Human Resources and initiated a hostile work environment complaint. This only made matters worse.

Unbeknownst to Karen, the HR manager and her manager were close friends. Disregarding all company policies, the HR manager informed Karen’s manager that an investigation was going to be launched to determine the veracity and impact of her complaint. How did Karen learn of all of this you ask? Great question. Karen’s manager was so confident that nothing adverse would happen to her post investigation that she advised Karen, “Before tattling, you should do your homework and know what you can and/or should say to certain people within the working environment.”

Over the next few months, the abusive supervisory engagement heightened. Karen’s manager became more overtly rude to her. Her body language and tone towards Karen created tension and decreased team communication. Many of Karen’s co-workers distanced themselves from her because they did not want to *get caught in the crossfire*.

Karen still tried her best to do her job. She remained professional, but was always on high alert. One evening after Karen left the office, she realized that she had forgotten some necessary paperwork on her desk to complete a project. When she walked into her office space, she saw her manager going through her desk. When Karen asked her what she was doing and why, her manager informed her that a) there was no expectation of privacy as long as she was the boss, b) she could do what she wanted to do because she was the boss, and c) she wanted to find out more about her enemy. Karen left the office without picking up her paperwork, not knowing what to do.

The next morning when Karen arrived at work, an unwitting co-worker informed her that they needed to cross train as she was asked to handle some of Karen's responsibilities. She showed Karen the note that was left on her desk – "Hi, Tanya, please get the strategic planning and training documents from Karen and ask her to bring you up to speed. I need someone to do this right." Karen broke down into tears. Her co-worker tried to console her, but to no avail. To add insult to injury, the HR manager sent Karen an email (yes, an email) to inform her that the results of the investigation were inconclusive, and the HR department could not move forward without more tangible evidence to demonstrate a hostile working environment. Karen was sad and angry, but not surprised. She tendered her resignation that afternoon, but not before cursing her manager out in a very public setting for all to hear.

### **I KNOW HOW TO PLAY YOUR GAME**

Not all stories end with the abusive supervisor winning. Sara refused to let an abusive supervisor negatively impact her work, her relationships, or her self-esteem. When the abusive supervision first started, Sara did not take it personally. She attributed the change in her manager's behavior towards her and others to external factors in his life that he had not yet reconciled. When he first started giving her the silent treatment by not responding to her emails, she once again assumed noble intent. She gave him the benefit of the doubt and thought that her emails were lost in the sea of other emails and obligations – until she asked him.

When Sara asked if he saw her emails, he tersely responded, "Yes. I deleted them." When pressed for an explanation, he advised that he wasn't interested in anything that she had to say.

Taken aback by such responses, Sara began to ask others if they noticed a difference in the manager's behavior. As she assumed, his abusive supervisory tactics were not isolated to her. Sara was not pleased and vowed to "make his life miserable." She solicited the assistance of multiple members of her team (male and female) as well as a couple of members from other departments to spread the word that John lacked competence and was losing the support of his staff. Sara, in what many people would describe as ill-advised, refused to talk to the supervisor and would only communicate

via email. During a few meetings, post the initiation of her surreptitious campaign against him, Sara would publicly embarrass John and act rudely towards him. She refused to do any extra work for him even when directly asked. She concealed information from him and blatantly disobeyed his instructions. When she continually engaged in such behaviors over the course of a 60-day period with impunity, other staff members began to engage in similar behaviors.

John had lost all respect from his staff. People overtly called him incompetent and challenged his authority. Anarchy ensued, and John experienced an organizational coup. He thought his positional power was enough to keep him safe. He did not anticipate an uprising among members of his team. He woefully underestimated the desire of individuals to engage in equity restoration behaviors when they feel slighted in the workplace. John's managers were made aware and shortly thereafter, he was terminated due to management performance issues. The day after John's last day, the team had a party and their new supervisor, Sara, bought them pizza and donuts.

# TRUST

## STORYTIME I THOUGHT YOU WERE MY FRIEND

Mark believed that his peer, Andrew, was his friend. They were both Vice President level employees and had similar personal situations (married with three kids). Mark wanted someone to talk to about internal workplace and external life situations. Andrew appeared to be trustworthy, thoughtful, experienced, prayerful, and a variety of other elements that mark deemed necessary prior to confiding in someone. Furthermore, Mark thought that Andrew understood, could empathize, and would benefit from talking to someone who was on a similar personal and professional journey. Initially, the relationship was reciprocal. They laughed, joked, told stories, offered some insight into their personal lives (even if only surface level), and welcomed constructive criticism regarding how to best handle a collection of disparate life scenarios.

As the weeks turned into months, Andrew's proactive engagement to dialogue with Mark heightened. That said, he began to speak less during his and Mark's conversations. Andrew became a sounding board for Mark and Mark was becoming more dependent on Andrew's counsel. As the *relationship* progressed, Mark failed to acquire a deeper understanding of why Andrew was proactively seeking him to engage in these personal/professional exchanges, but was being more reserved with his words during their conversations. Unbeknownst to Mark, Andrew found Mark's weaknesses and was more than willing to exploit those weaknesses for his own professional gain. To Andrew, Mark's desire to *need a friend within the workplace* and his willingness to *so easily lean on someone* were signs of weakness themselves.

Mark and Andrew were both one step away from C-Suite positions. They were both well aware of their professional dynamic. The pressures, stressors, and triggers that they both felt were very real. The ascension to the top of the corporate ladder was not for the faint of heart. It required lion-like focus and an ability to compartmentalize segments of one's life. Mark's *problem* was that he lacked the same *killer instinct* that motivated Andrew. Mark was also much more emotional and communicative about

things that bothered him. Overly emotional, hyper-communicative, and lacking killer instinct was a bad combination to expose when dealing with someone like Andrew.

Although the competition to reach the next step on the corporate ladder moved far beyond Andrew and Mark, Andrew desired the C-suite more than Mark's friendship. There was only room for one Chief Operating Officer. If Andrew could remove one of his competitors and limit that individual's ability to play the game, it would increase his visibility and chances of taking the next step. The social engineering and ingratiation phase had commenced. Andrew listened intently to Mark's personal and professional problems. He gave him what could be perceived as thoughtful counsel and asked thoughtful questions to better understand the presented situations. Andrew was playing the role of the perfect courtier. Mark did not catch on until it was too late.

As the competition for the C-Suite intensified, Mark began to reveal more information through his behaviors, words, and questions that indicated a lack of confidence. He also became more liberal in his speech about the current leadership cadre and how he would play if selected to join the C-Suite team. You are probably wondering why someone would do such a thing. Why would someone be that forthcoming with the competition, particularly when the competition is not reciprocating? Mark considered Andrew a friend. That's why. The truth is that he was a target.

During Mark's first of three interviews with various C-Suite representatives and Board members, they mentioned some things to him about his personal life that they should not have known. They asked him about his wife and father-in-law's health situations. They framed the question in a broader context to mask the direct nature on the query, but he was suspicious as to the relevance of the question. During interview number two, they prompted him about some of his marital indiscretions when he was a newlywed. Again, they framed the questions in a larger context of character and integrity. It was clear that the executive team had information on him that he had not shared with anyone other than Andrew.

The COO search was quite the extensive and lengthy process. After the second interview, Mark completely withdrew from Andrew. Communication was nonexistent. When Andrew tried to engage in dialogue, there was tension. Mark told him that he knew what he did and no longer trusted him. Andrew feigned surprise and hurt, but

Mark knew better. Mark's openness and willingness to trust Andrew and Andrew's disposition to take advantage of that trust for personal and professional gain caused irreparable damage to the *friendship*. During the third interview, Mark knew that he no longer had a chance. His character, integrity, strength, confidence, competence, familial issues, and extracurricular activities were all discussed. While Mark was able to justify his actions, particularly his personal actions, he was an emotional wreck. He also retaliated against Andrew by shining a light on Andrew's lack of loyalty and discretion. He was convinced that Andrew shared his personal information with the selection committee. Andrew was the only person with whom he shared such intimate details of his life.

Ultimately, neither Mark nor Andrew received the C-Suite promotion, but the war of words and direct retaliatory behaviors were in full effect. Mark initiated a full-on smear campaign against Andrew. He informed his team that Andrew lacked character, was not to be trusted, and they should not engage with him or members of his team because they likely have taken on their characteristics of their *leader*. Anytime Andrew's team had to collaborate with Mark's team, the process was brutal. It took longer than necessary and cost more money. Mark increased the stakes when he contacted Andrew's wife via letter to suggest to her that Andrew was having an affair. Even though the suggestion was without merit at the time, it planted a seed of doubt in Andrew's marriage. Furthermore, anytime an executive meeting was called in which Mark and Andrew had to participate, they sat on opposite sides of the room and Mark would not engage Andrew in any way. Well, he made it a point to call Andrew a snake multiple times during those meetings. The tensions were palpable and everyone in the room knew why. Mark was extremely good at his job, as was Andrew, so the other executives tolerated their shenanigans – until they had enough.

The attacks became so vicious that the company began to lose money, some team members who were directly or indirectly caught in the crossfire resigned, and service delivery was suffering. The collateral consequences were too dire for the executive team. Both men were terminated – A downward spiral of two promising careers because trust was broken.



# PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACTS

## STORYTIME YOU SAID THAT I WOULD BE THE BOSS

Cindy was confident that she would be selected as the next General Manager. In a public setting, her manager confirmed that she had the necessary background and skill set to lead. At least, that is what Cindy heard in her mind. There was no such confirmation. During a meeting in which the business unit's Vice President was describing pending organizational changes and succession plans, he offered insight into the forthcoming General Manager position.

Once he completed outlining the proposed future organizational state, Cindy asked if she could be considered for the General Manager. Cindy was quite ambitious and had received counsel that the best way to get someone to commit to something was to ask in a public setting. She did just that. The Vice President, quite calculating and thoughtful in his phraseology and word choice, spoke in a manner that could not be perceived as being committal and/or confirmatory of her request. He advised Cindy that all qualified internal candidates would have the opportunity to apply for the position. He further noted that her previous experiences, proven record of accomplishment, and willingness to simply *get the job done* would likely make her a viable candidate for consideration.

***Psychological contract generated.*** Cindy responded that she was “grateful and looked forward to the opportunity.” The Vice President tried to temper her expectations by reiterating that anyone could apply and that it would be a highly competitive process. She did not hear any of that. The contract, in her mind, was solidified and now it was only a matter of time before she could lead the organization as a General Manager.

While the Vice President's intentions were to create an atmosphere of empowerment and confidence building by highlighting a few of Cindy's positive attributes, she received his words as him confirming her ability to be the General Manager. Her ideologically infused psychological contract and the resultant euphoria that she felt emboldened her pursuit. When she told others, who were also present in the meeting, of her plans once she became General Manager, they also tried to temper her expectations because they did not hear the same thing that she heard. It did not matter. In her mind, the contract

was there. Furthermore, there was no need to re-engage the Vice President as he has spoken positively about her in a public setting.

When the call for nominations was released, Cindy engaged. She provided all of the requested mandatory and optional documentation well before the submission deadline. She was ecstatic when she was called in for an interview. This request was further confirmation that she was General Manager material and would be selected for the coveted role. Immediately after the interview, while she was still in the room, the selection committee informed Cindy that she was a strong candidate and that she would hear from them within two weeks. Cindy understood and added that the Vice President had personally told her during a meeting that she was a top-tier candidate (again, the Vice President said no such thing). He noted that her experiences, proven track record, etc., would *likely* make her a viable candidate. Her revisionist memory exaggerated his words.

Cindy's unilateral psychological contract, individualized account of activities, and belief in reciprocity (I did X, ergo my organization should do Y) positioned her for a major meltdown if she was, in fact, not selected to be the General Manager. As promised, the process was highly-competitive. Dozens of people submitted documentation for consideration. Cindy made the top 15, then top 10, then top 5. Then...game over. Cindy was not selected as a top 3 candidate and would not be afforded the opportunity to lead as General Manager.

Cindy was angry, mad, and confused. She did not understand why the Vice President would say the things he said about her and why the selection committee members were so agreeable during the interviews. She even sent the Vice President a note explaining that she did not understand why he would say that she was a great candidate (her words, not his) in a public forum if he did not intend to select her as the new General Manager. He was gracious in his response and informed Cindy that although she did very well throughout the interview process, there were candidates who rated higher. He also advised her to stay connected and be ready when new opportunities availed themselves.

There was an immediate and noteworthy change to Cindy's behavior. There was a complete lack of trust in her upper management. She considered everything that they

said to be doubt worthy. Communication decreased, organizational citizenship behaviors declined, and she progressively withdrew from even the closest of colleagues. There was a deep reduction in the expectations associated with future obligations. Cindy was no longer willing to go *above and beyond* to aid in the achievement of organizational objectives and she had limited desire to share her expertise with others, particularly the incoming General Manager. Cindy still played the game while in the working environment, but only because she needed the paycheck and only until she found a new role. Cindy felt that the Vice President should have honored his words, and that the amount of time, energy, and effort that she gave to the organization were supposed to be rewarded in the way that she deemed desirable. Cindy did the bare minimum to maintain her full-time employment status until she had an opportunity to leave. When a new career enhancing role availed it, without hesitation, Cindy accepted and submitted her resignation effective immediately.