

Dealing with a bad manager

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One of the problems with being in the early stages of your conservation career is that very often you are not the one leading the team. You might be volunteering, or perhaps you're in one of your first paid roles. What do you do if you encounter a bad leader – perhaps a Bill or a Sidney, as Barry describes in this week's podcast? If you're volunteering then you could simply choose to go and try something else. But what if you're in a paid role that you don't want to leave? Or maybe the volunteering that you're undertaking is key to building up your experience and you want to stick at it? What do you do then? How do you cope? In my career I have encountered my fair share of bad leaders. Some have been like Bill, others much more like Sidney. Either way, I think there are a few key things to bear in mind. Let's call them my five top tips for dealing with a bad manager. I can't guarantee they will work every time, but they are methods I have used to help keep me sane during some difficult periods.

1. Try to think about/articulate why your manager is a bad leader. As strange as it might sound, I think it can be really helpful to think about why you think your manager, or the person leading your team, is a bad leader. As Barry describes in his podcast this week, bad leaders are often on a continuum ranging from someone with the characteristics of Bill at one end, to indecisive Sidney at the other. It can be very easy just to moan about them, but that isn't going to help anyone, least of all yourself. By thinking about what it is they do badly you can start to work out ways to cope with this; and also to make sure that when you're in a more senior role, you don't repeat the mistakes they're making. It might just make you feel more in control of the situation. It is also important to remember that the person might not even recognise how their actions are affecting the team. If you feel able to, your first course of action should therefore be to discuss it with them in person. You never know, you might help to make them a better leader.
2. Focus on the positives. It's very likely that if you are in a conservation job, or are volunteering, then there will be elements of the role that you enjoy, regardless of how your manager is behaving. Yes, their leadership might be making your life more difficult than it needs to be, but try not to let this completely overwhelm you. Remind yourself of what it is that you enjoy about the job, and try and focus your energies on that.
3. Build positive relationships with your peers. Just because you have a bad manager doesn't mean you can't build good relationships with your peers. Sometimes if you're in a team with a bad leader, morale can be low. But moaning to each other about how bad the situation is, won't make anyone feel any better. So why not take the lead, be the person who looks for the positives. I can guarantee that if you do that, you'll make yourself feel better and you'll be a positive influence on those around you.
4. Lead upwards. This is a subject we will come on to later in the programme but remember that leading isn't just about how you manage staff or volunteers who work for you. Set an example: treat others in the way you wish to be treated yourself, and behave in a way that you would expect others to do. Just because you have a bad boss shouldn't give you an excuse to start being stropky or grumpy. Maybe if you respond to difficult situations in a positive manner you will start to see a change in others – including those bad leaders who are making everyone's life more challenging than it needs to be.
5. Talk to someone. If you have genuine concerns about a poor manager or someone in a senior position who is making your life difficult, then don't be afraid of telling someone about it. Some NGOs have a HR manager you could speak to, but if you're in one of the smaller organisations that doesn't have a dedicated HR department, it is best to speak to someone senior who you think you can trust. Think rationally and try and explain your concerns in a calm and thoughtful fashion without getting too emotive about it. But remember, always try and bring the issues up with your manager first.