

WORKING

SUNDAY

When bad bosses happen to good people

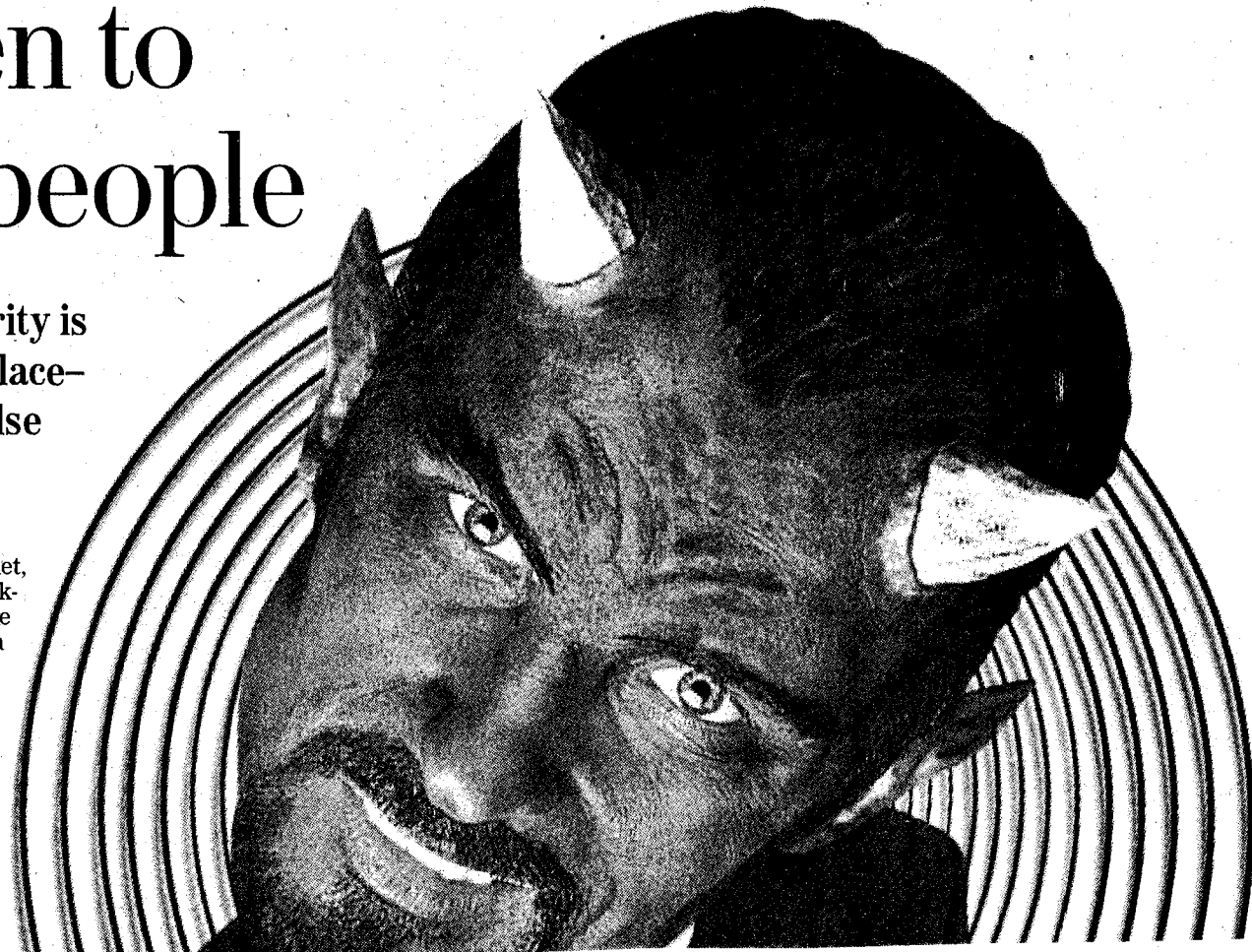
Misbehavior by authority is tolerated in the workplace—and almost nowhere else

By Rebecca Theim

Special to the Tribune

Although they've never met, Chicagoans Harlan Didrickson, Mary Faith McConville and Ian Murphy share a bond: brief—but nightmarish—stints at the mercy of the most dreaded of workplace tribulations: the bad boss.

Didrickson, who is now office manager for Skidmore Owings, a large downtown architectural firm, recalls his previous stint in the office of a prominent personal injury lawyer who ordered him to miss Christmas with his family to serve dinner to her guests at her Florida vacation home.



Conville has memories of a boss who berated her female employees if they attended meetings without applying lipstick. Murphy, editor of *American Drycleaner* magazine, worked as art director for a local trade magazine whose owner routinely showed up hours late for meetings she had called—in her bathrobe.

They can be combative or sullen, egotistical or manipulative, intimidating or passive-aggressive. Bad bosses come in as many shapes and sizes as the human personality, but all pose a considerable problem and cost to companies and workers alike.

"If a schoolteacher is abusing students, we get rid of him or her," said Gregory P. Smith, founder and president of Chart Your Course International, a Conyers, Ga., training and consulting firm, that has worked with Chicago-area organizations including the American Hospital Association and Ace Hardware Corp. "Same with a doctor who's killing patients. Why is it that management is the only field in which we tolerate bad behavior, even when it costs companies lots of money? It's because we have the attitude that people are expendable."

Part of the problem in large organizations is that it's difficult for senior management to quickly spot a bad boss, according to Fred Reichheld, director emeritus of international consultancy Bain & Company, and author of "Loyalty Rules" (Harvard Business School, \$27.50).

"There are two ways bosses can achieve financial results in the short term," Reichheld said. "The first is through their own success. The second is at the expense of employees and customers. The problem is that it's very difficult to tell a difference between the two in the short term."

Organizational psychologist Jordan Levin, with Chicago's Adler School of Professional Psychology Management, said that recognition of a bad boss "usually comes after a great deal of damage already has been done." The warning signs? "Too many people leaving, too many people absent, too many people looking to take sick leave, coming in late or leaving early."

Expensive executives

Bad bosses cost companies money: the cost of replacing departing workers ranges from \$4,000 to \$7,000 for an entry-level employee to tens of thousands of dollars for a more experienced worker, according to Smith, author of "Here Today, Here Tomorrow: Transforming Your Workforce from High-Turnover to High-Retention" (Dearborn Trade Publishing, \$19.95).

The other factor is lost sales. In his work with Bain's Loyalty Practice, Reichheld determined

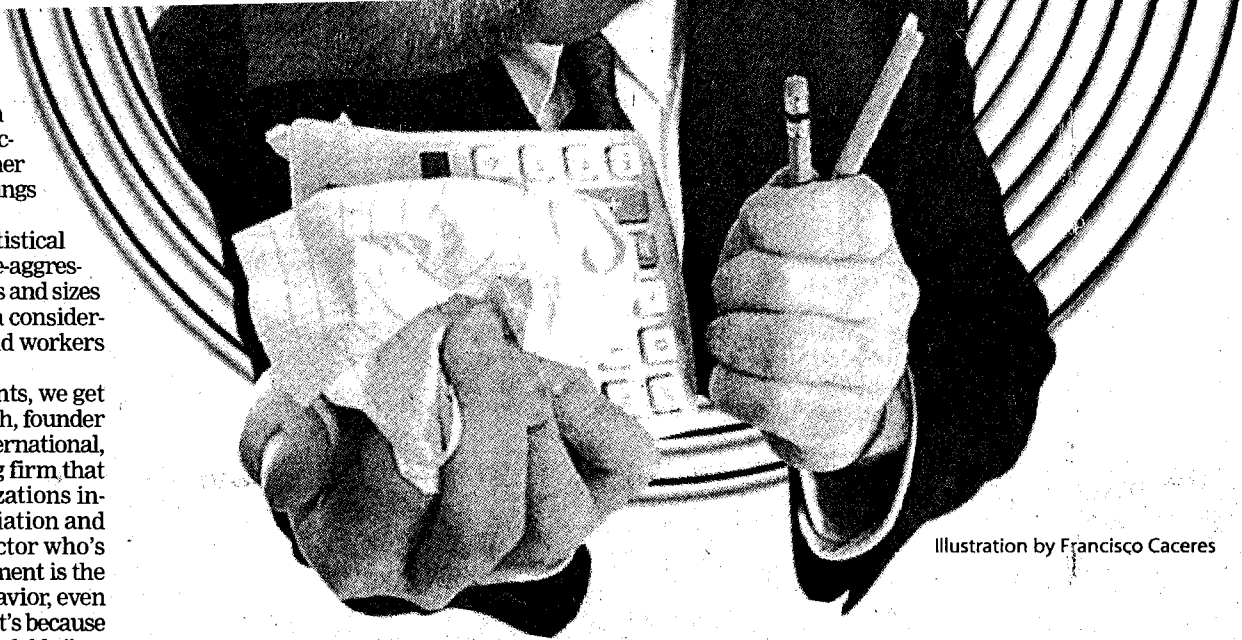


Illustration by Francisco Caceres

that a 5 percent swing in customer retention rates result in a 25 percent to 95 percent fluctuation in a company's earnings. In a complementary nationwide survey of workers, Bain found that a startling 45 percent of respondents felt their employers did not deserve their loyalty.

In another nationwide survey conducted last year by Smith's company, more than 40 percent of respondents said their primary reason for remaining in a job was because of a "good boss." Thirty-five percent said they had left past jobs primarily because of their bosses' attitude and almost one-quarter said problems with supervisors caused their greatest dissatisfaction at work.

Suzy Wetlaufer, editor of the *Harvard Business Review*, said, "A lot of bad bosses aren't bad on purpose. It's just very, very hard to be a good boss and many people are thrown into the role with little or no training."

Attitude adjustment

While the jury is out on whether a person can learn the character traits and maturity needed to be a good boss, most experts contend that whether a bad boss can be reformed depends largely on whether he is a bad boss or a bad person.

"A bad boss can be taught—with the proper motivation—to be a better boss," said McConville, who has managed human resources for a number of Chicago-area organizations. "But a bad person—someone who has a character or personality defect that makes it impossible for him to be empathetic

or self-aware—is someone who should never be in a managerial role."

So what should employees do while they wait for a bad boss to self-destruct?

"Employees should try to understand where bad bosses are coming from, which involves trying to figure out their insecurities and the pressures they're under from their own bosses," Smith said.

And if you suspect you're a bad boss, listen to what your employees are trying to tell you, advises Richard Boyatzis, chair of the organizational behavior department at the Weatherhead School of Management at Cleveland's Case Western Reserve University.

"We've found that simply making someone aware of problems can lead to significant improvement in self-knowledge, flexibility and understanding of others," he said.

While Boyatzis said the frequent corporate downsizings of the past decade mean there are "far fewer places for bad managers to hide," some think tough economic times make it easier for bad bosses to survive—but only in the short term. "Recessions don't last forever; people's memories are long and if you mistreat your employees, they'll jump at the first chance they get," Wetlaufer said.

If your boss is someone who's willing to abuse employees to meet this quarter's results, there's only one answer: the exit door, he said.

Even if you can't leave right away, "Finding the right set of people to work with ought to be your primary objective," Reichheld said.