

# Bad bosses come in two forms—dark or dysfunctional

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Seth M. Spain is an assistant professor of organizational behavior at Binghamton University, State University of New York. Credit: Jonathan Cohen/Binghamton University

Bad bosses generally come in two forms. There are the dysfunctional ones, like Michael Scott from the TV series *The Office*; then there are the dark ones, like Gordon Gekko from the film *Wall Street*. Researchers including Seth M. Spain from Binghamton University, State University of New York are building a framework to better understand the behaviors of bad bosses and to reduce workplace stress.

In a new chapter from *Research in Occupational Stress and Well-Being* titled, "Stress, Well-Being, And the Dark Side of Leadership," Binghamton University Assistant Professor of Organizational Behavior Seth M. Spain looks to establish a taxonomy for identifying bad bosses and their distinct behaviors. He said that there are two definitions of a bad boss: dark or dysfunctional, and both can cause a great deal of stress to employees.

"They don't want to hurt you," said Spain of

dysfunctional bosses. "Through lack of skill, or other personality defects, they're just not very good at their job. Largely, that's what we would call 'dysfunctional.'"

Dark bosses, on the other hand, have destructive behaviors, and hurt others to elevate themselves, said Spain. These bosses are looked at through the three characteristics called the "Dark Triad," which includes Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy.

"[These are] people who enjoy the pain and suffering of others—they're going to be mean, abusive and harassing in daily life," said Spain.

That's not to say that there aren't degrees in which these characteristics are displayed. Everybody exhibits these behaviors at some level, said Spain.

According to Spain, bad bosses, whether they're dysfunctional or dark, can cause a great deal of stress to employees.

"A person's direct supervisor is a lens through which they view their work experience. We think, in particular, that a [boss](#) can be an incredibly substantial source of stress for people who work for them," said Spain.

Having this framework of behaviors that bad bosses exhibit can be the first step into fixing them, ultimately reducing stress in the workplace, said Spain.

"We believe that these characteristics are extremely important for understanding employee development and career advancement," said Spain. "Understanding the role that these characteristics play in [stress](#) experiences at work is extremely important, especially since bad leaders can cause so much suffering for their subordinates."

**More information:** *Research in Occupational*

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