"I'll Ask the Questions"

The Insecure Boss

John Lubans, Jr.

There I was, all spiffy in coat and tie, nervously anticipating my first library job interview at the placement service during an ALA Annual Conference in Detroit. In the last semester of library school, I was looking for a job. Times were good: more vacancies than applicants, a ratio of four to one. I forget the name of my interviewer—an academic library director—but I have not forgotten his admonishment to me shortly after shaking hands and getting the other pleasantries out of the way: "I'll ask the questions."

I'd been making polite conversation and expressing interest in the job and the college. I never have figured out what triggered his insecurity gene. Maybe he wasn't looking for someone to think; maybe he just needed someone to do as told. Job seeker or not, his "I'll ask the questions" scratched my entry in the race for that job.

After graduation, I wound up at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) working for Edward A. Chapman, who encouraged me to ask questions and find answers. He was a mentor to me for many years, continuing long after I moved on from RPI. Library colleagues tell me I've had an exceptional run of luck in working with several of the genuine leaders in libraryland. Overall, only one of my bosses has been less-than-supportive. I would term that boss, while competent, insecure.

What do I mean by insecure? To me, it's the often irrational dread of being found somehow wanting. A fear of our weaknesses being exposed, for all to see, like the Wizard in the Land of Oz, revealed as a charlatan. Most of us have some inner angst, as in the cartoonish question, "Honey, do these pants make me look fat?" But, when our anxieties control us, we may develop a malevolent envy worthy of an Iago.

The Insecure Boss Described

Are insecure bosses a mirror image of good leaders? Where one group goes right, the other group goes left? If good leaders inspire, do insecure leaders uninspire? Or is it more complicated than that? Are insecure boss traits unique to the insecure, or do these traits stray over into the realm of the good boss, too?

Here are terms that describe the insecure boss: aggressive, bully, control freak, deceitful, delusional, envious, indecisive, isolated, jealous, mean-spirited, micromanager, paranoid, petty, prissy, radioactive, reactive, rude, sneaky, sociopath, vengeful, tidy, and untrustworthy. As you can see from this roll call, the generic insecure boss ranges from the prissy fussbudget to the vengeful tyrant. Some insecure bosses are disasters, while others hardly create a negative ripple. Insecurity, then, is a matter of degree.

Most of us can identify an insecure boss; we may be one. Insecurity does not always signal incapacity. Like childhood nightmares, we've learned to keep our insecurities at bay, holding back our petty responses, irrational fears, and impulses. And, we've probably grown out of some of our inadequacies so that they no longer impede our competence. Supporting others is a positive part of the library work culture; it's safe to say most of us genuinely care about and wish the best for our fellow workers

Some highly insecure bosses can be decisive and seemingly effective; they are successful at masking the most visible of their insecurities. And if they are in a tradition-bound business with low expectations for innovation, they can be seen as "successful." However, over time, the less-secure boss tends to develop a largely reactive organization because, in my experience, he employs acquiescent people and avoids independent thinkers.

As shown in figure 1, the insecure boss in the quadrant is influenced by two conditions: competence and insecurity.[1]

The Radioactive Boss (high insecurity and high competence), has the capacity to be effective but, because of self-doubt, has great difficulty letting go and sharing power. This person fears independent followers and may punish effective subordinates just because they think for themselves. Externally, the radioactive boss may appear fully in charge and highly visible—indeed his radioactivity

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is invisible, unless you happen to carry a metaphorical Geiger counter. The radioactive boss is almost always the first on the job and the last to leave. Depending on the type of organization, the radioactive boss may be able to chase off, with impunity, any people who question the status quo. The organizational overseers may regard this action—"getting rid of trouble makers"—as decisive and good for the organization.

The Effective Leader (low insecurity and high competence), capitalizes on the talents that subordinates bring to the organization. Because their personal confidence is high, letting others excel can be genuinely satisfying, not envy-inducing. The effective leader takes great pride in recruiting, promoting, staunchly defending, and mentoring independent subordinates. Subordinate mistakes are accepted as part of getting better. The resulting organizational climate permits staff to do their best without fear of punishment for excelling. It is only under this rare type of library leader where an organization can be proactive throughout.

The Petty Boss (low competence and high insecurity), does a poor job of masking his self-doubts and borders on incompetence. While resenting independent followers, the petty boss does not have the administrative support to run them off. The petty boss inevitably runs into trouble with his or her staff and bosses—unless the staff and bosses are equally or more inept. Even if the petty boss's boss is competent and likely to abbreviate that person's tenure, the petty boss can do significant damage. An accumulation of delayed decisions, poor hiring, and other pettifogging actions may take years to overcome.

The Benign Bumbler (low competence and low insecurity), is beloved by subordinates, values effective followers, and, because they are not threatened, allows subordinates to excel, all while, of course, enabling an incompetent boss. However, if no one steps in to help out the benign bumbler, then internecine strife can lead to disarray among the staff. In exasperation, effective followers will abandon the field, leaving behind a largely ineffective staff to muddle along.

Evolving Leaders—many of us—are found in the center of the quadrant. Our location is largely influenced by circumstances and experience, for better or for worse. We often have a hand (or a foot) in all four corners, as situations arise and circumstances impose. Through real-life work experiences, hopefully, our self-doubts lessen, our competencies develop, and we become more effective over time.

If we were bullied once, we may learn how to respond the next time in a different, more positive way. Or, if we are embarrassed by a hard-to-defend decision based on inadequate information, we may realize the essential need to know our job, lessening the anxiety around a challenged, gut-level decision. If we work for a radioactive boss, we may learn from his competencies—for application elsewhere—while discounting the inadequacies.

On the down side, a long-term abusive relationship between a boss and a subordinate can lead to a perma-
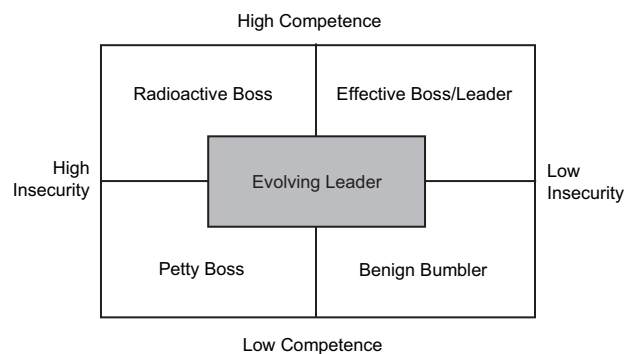
Figure 1. Insecure Boss Quadrant ©2007 John Lubans, Jr.

nently insecure subordinate. A junior staff member who is regularly abused by a radioactive boss may one day emulate that boss.

In the Cross Hairs

What do you do when several of those insecure boss meta-tags (such as vengeful, radioactive, deceitful, or paranoid) can be pinned on your boss? Worse, what do you do when your insecure boss wants you gone?

We can try to understand what is behind the behavior. We can look for clues that might help us with our well-being. Remember, an insecure boss wants it to be your fault that the relationship did not work. Such bosses cannot admit to themselves, except in those self-loathing glimpses in the mirror, that they themselves are the problem. A hallmark of radioactive bosses, and the organizations in which they flourish, is a profound inability to admit errors. If the organization backs up the boss, as it often does, the targeted individual stands alone.

What follows is contrarian advice: Do not talk with the boss about the situation; instead, get ready to move. (If you can't move, invest in an hour's conversation with a reputable labor attorney.) I know, in this Dr. Phil era, that we want to have that heart-to-heart chat, no doubt ending in a hug. Well, doing that may only aggravate an already bad situation. The insecure boss does not want to talk about it, does not want to have that quintessential conversation. A highly effective library leader told me how his radioactive university president—an expert at wielding the "perfumed dagger"—reassured him when he questioned her level of support and asked her how he could do better. "You are doing a great job!" she exclaimed. Afterwards, she tacitly doubled her efforts to undermine him. That she now knew that he knew had made him even more of a threat.

Retaliation is another reason not to have that conversation. In one large metropolitan library system, anyone questioning a policy's rationale would receive one of two capricious punishments: banishment to the branch library furthest from the critic's home, or two weeks suspension

without pay. The supervising board's apparent acquiescence shut off any avenue for the staff to pursue grievances.

Or, having that conversation might earn you the "silent treatment," a favored tool of some insecure bosses to remove anyone that is no longer wanted. You become invisible. This shunning tactic works because many of us do not bear up well when ostracized (our own insecurities are heightened, along with our blood pressure), and ultimately we figure out what's happening and get while the going is good.

Of course, there are no absolutes. Do talk with the non-toxic boss. If your boss is more Austin Powers than Doctor Evil, you might have a shot at helping each other by calmly and openly offering your support. If the boss is amenable—and has the competence to accept your offer—you may forge a productive relationship.

Free Advice

Well, a young manager might ask, what can I do to get past my anxieties and build my competencies? Here are some ideas I've picked up from reading Barbara Kellerman's book *Bad Leadership: What It Is, How It Happens, Why It Matters*.[2] While her advice is meant to help the ethically challenged, these ideas can help anyone wanting to get the upper hand over job-related anxieties, whether self-induced or inflicted by a bad boss.

Get real and stay real. If you work with others, understand that you cannot go it alone; you need everyone alongside and pulling in the same direction. Thinking that success is up to you alone is delusional. Listen to what library users are saying. Never dismiss them as uninformed; they often have the answer years in advance of the profession. To reduce self-importance, use humor. A self-deprecating humor helps us not get carried away with our importance and to remain anchored in reality. Practice getting outside yourself and seeing if you have become the butt of a joke. If so, have a good chuckle, and learn from it.

Stay balanced. Besides humor, maintain other interests, spend time with your family and friends, and do not dwell excessively on work. Outside interests can lead to unexpected insights and give you anchoring ideas as well as the ability to gain some objectivity. Tuning out work can result in unexpected solutions.

Remember the mission. It's not about you. It's about the purpose of the organization. When it starts to be about you, you are well on your way to an insecurity that is swollen-to-the-bursting-point—think apoplexy. Focus on the long view. You will not get all that you would like, but, with patience, you will get plenty if your vision serves the best interests of the organization. Besides, ours is a noble profession.

Stay healthy. If we fixate on work at the expense of our health, then no one is well-served. Healthfulness can do much to maintain our psychological well-being. Work comes with stress; don't aggravate the stress with excess in diet, or toiling week in and week out with long hours on the job.

Develop a personal support system. Establish and maintain personal and professional friendships that you can trust for real conversations, ones in which you share your doubts and dreams. And that will give you insights and ideas for improving how you work with others.

Be creative. While being creative or proactive can be a stress inducer because of organizational opposition to change, the creative process can lead to a glowing sense of accomplishment. That comes from enduring and overcoming adversity. Proactive endeavors will spotlight colleagues who have similar aspirations. They may be people to rely on during the next challenge. Plug them into your personal support system.

Be reflective. Think about what you do and why you are doing it. What would happen if you stopped doing it? From time to time, list goals and approximate where you are. Reflect on things that did not work out. Without blaming anyone, think of how things could have worked out. Learn from it. Include others in these reflections, when doing so makes sense. Spend time alone—we are too rarely ever by ourselves. One colleague went to the desert and spent a night alone—with several gallons of water—considering his life and his career. A few hours alone, say, off-trail in the woods, can lead to life-changing insights. With a little reflection, even the "I'll ask the questions" boss at the ALA Annual Conference might have quizzed himself: "Why do I need to ask all the questions?"

References and Notes

1. Quadrant illustration used with permissionof the author.
2. Barbara Kellerman, *Bad Leadership: What It Is, How It Happens, Why It Matters* (Boston: Harvard Business School Pr., 2004), 233–35.