

# **BAD BOSS**



WHAT TO DO IF YOU  
WORK FOR ONE,  
MANAGE ONE OR  
ARE ONE

**MICHELLE  
GIBBINGS**

WILEY



Don't let the title fool you, this is not a 'bag the boss book'; far from it. What stood out for me was the emphasis on relationships at all levels and the personal responsibility each of us must take to make any relationship work. Filled with insights, practical tips, real life stories and timeout questions, Michelle encourages reflection, personal assessment and improvement planning as well as the honesty to consider if it may be time to explore alternate options.

As a Leader or Leader of Leaders, there are important reminders of the privilege and responsibilities held to support and coach others reach their individual or leadership potential, as well as the personal reminder that Leaders never stop needing to develop themselves, reflect and potentially change to get the best out of others.

A book I am sure you will continue to pick up, review based on point-in-time situations, and take ongoing tips from for years to come.

— **Helene Gordon**, Executive General Manager,  
People and Communications, Sensis

Bad bosses come at a huge cost for people and productivity, and are a staple of everyday conversation. Yet our conversation about bad bosses often takes the form of blame and externalising — 'if only other people behaved better!' Michelle Gibbings' new book, *Bad Boss*, holds us accountable for how we are all part of the problem — whether we report to a bad boss, manage a bad boss, or are a bad boss — and restores our agency in fixing the problem. This is a book full of insight, compassion and practical suggestions for managing your career, your organisation and yourself.

— **Professor Michael Gilding**, Pro Vice Chancellor, Faculty of  
Business and Law, Swinburne University of Technology

Michelle has again delivered a 'must-read' for both leaders and followers of today and tomorrow. There is a huge dose of honesty in this book that is peppered with humour, grounded with stories and thought starters, and filled with wads of common sense. It will challenge you to be better, think differently and own your actions and reactions. It is indeed a book about hope.

— **Angela Green**, Financial Services Executive

We can all relate to stories about a bad boss, but what about when we've been the bad boss? If you have the courage to examine your own blind spots and are driven to change, Michelle's latest book will help you become a better leader.

—**Julia van Graas**, Co-founder, Spiique

Being a follower and having a boss, being a boss, and the boss of bosses are all transformative stages in a potential leadership journey. Michelle's insights will help you to create a roadmap for your transformation into exercising better leadership!

—**Samantha Sharp**, Director of Commissioning and Performance,  
Western Victoria Primary Health Network

We've all worked for one, we may have had one working for us and if we are brave enough to admit it, we've all been one ourselves from time to time. Yes, you know them, the *Bad Boss*. At its heart this book is about hope and bravery and a must read for anyone who wants to own their journey in developing themselves as a great leader. Michelle expertly sets out easy to implement actions for leaders at any level to apply at any time to turn a bad boss situation into a best boss situation. Michelle's book is packed with advice, anecdotes, and leadership stories that will inspire you to have real conversations, develop and nurture real relationships and be your real you. This is a book that I will refer back to time and again over my leadership journey.

—**Claire Cornfield**, General Manager—Operations, HESTA

Increased day-to-day pressures, longer hours and the challenge of maintaining a positive, diverse workplace are the new norms experienced by employees at any level. Success is achieved through being the best 'you' at work, decisive career development and growing through personal experience to deliver impact. However, this only relates to personal performance. The greater challenge relates to how this translates to the value created by those around you.

The real beauty in *Bad Boss* is that it gives us all the opportunity to turn the mirror on ourselves to assess and challenge ourselves as a leader. Filled with stories, challenging questions and conversation starters, *Bad Boss* allows us to step in the shoes of others in our organisation to consider leadership from different perspectives.

In *Bad Boss*, Michelle provides a comprehensive toolkit to build awareness of personal success drivers, but also fashion shifts and adjustments to create cohesive, high-performing teams that multiply value creation and increase engagement. As in her previous books, Michelle does this in an easy to follow, relatable and intuitive way, applicable to almost any relationship-driven workplace challenge.

— **Richard Benjamin**, Group Director–Strategy, Urbis

It's a familiar saying that 'people don't leave bad jobs, they leave bad bosses'. If you have ever complained or thought about leaving your job because of your boss or have a sneaking suspicion that maybe you are a bad boss or could be a better boss, then this is the book for you.

Michelle's book, *Bad Boss*, is a wonderfully astute and practical guide in helping to deal with or improve your relationship with your boss. Along the way, you may also find some insights about yourself and what you want to achieve. I know that I did.

— **Jenny Macdonald**, Non-Executive Director

Early in my career whilst an employee of a major Australian bank, I asked the CEO at the time 'What makes a great leader?'. He responded with 'Great followers'. As simple as this sounded it is something that resonated with me. Great teams are developed and influenced by authentic and nurturing leaders. Team members follow the leader not because they have to, but because they want to.

In this book, Michelle clearly identifies aspects and traits of what differentiates a good boss from a bad boss. There are some wonderful insights, and 'time outs' which encourage and enable introspection to assist readers to identify what role they can play in assisting a bad boss if they work for one, how they might better influence and coach a bad boss if they manage one, or open their eyes and mindset to understand and determine if they are in fact a bad boss.

Working through this book it became clear to me that through my leadership journey I have found myself in all three situations. If I had access then to the tips and tools in this book, the change required in all instances would have been far easier to navigate. If you are prepared to invest the time and effort to reflect, seek feedback and take action then the outcomes detailed in this book are well within reach.

— **Robert Ford**, Chief Executive Officer,  
Victorian Leaders

As our individual relationships to work keep changing, our relationships with the people at work remains key to our well-being and our performance. It's no surprise that for most employees their most important professional relationship is with their boss. Through this deft collection of frameworks and insights, Michelle provides a powerful challenge to take ownership of how we relate to each other on a human level with humility and authenticity. Her personal reflections on how she's refocused her own approach provides a wonderfully simple message of hope for how we can evolve our relationships in the workplace ... 'I built lasting friendships and connections that enabled us to do more and be more'.

— **Daniel Madhavan**, Chief Executive Officer,  
Impact Investment Group

In the corporate world, leaders often feel powerless either working for a bad boss or as an ineffective leader. Michelle's book provides an excellent framework to help navigate a pathway to positively change the situation you may be in, whether you are early in your career or a senior executive.

— **Lynley Corcoran**, HR Executive

Michelle Gibbings is a refreshing voice in a sea of authentic leadership, sharing helpful and practical solutions for both bosses and employees based on her own extensive leadership and coaching experience along with insights from the latest research.

In this book, Michelle makes a compelling case to truly understand the impact an authentic leader can have and offers surprisingly practical questions to generate awareness and actionable steps for both the boss and employee to own their role in cultivating a positive employment relationship.

— **Deborah Greenwood-Smith**, Chief Operating Officer, Equiem

As someone who has been working for over 35 years, I found *Bad Boss* to be very relatable to my experience in the corporate world and sometimes uncomfortable as I recognised examples of my own behaviour when I wasn't at my best. The power of Michelle's book is that she helps make this behaviour discussable and provides practical and implementable strategies for improving the most critical working relationship we have.

— **Steve Whitelung**, Chief Risk Officer

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michelle Gibbings is a workplace expert obsessed with building workplaces where leaders and employees thrive, and great things happen.

She's the author of *Step Up: How to build your influence at work* and *Career Leap: How to reinvent and liberate your career*.

Through her passion and advocacy for better ways of leading and working, Michelle has built a distinguished reputation as the keynote speaker, adviser and executive mentor of choice for leading edge corporates and global organisations.

Before establishing her leadership practice, she worked for some of the world's biggest organisations—much of the time in senior leadership positions. Yes, she's been the employee, boss and boss's boss too.

She regularly appears across a range of media including *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Australian*, the *Australian Financial Review*, the *Herald Sun*, *CEO Magazine*, *HR Director*, the *Today* show and various radio stations.

When not facilitating sessions, mentoring, writing or speaking at conferences, Michelle loves to travel and experience life with her best friend and husband, Craig.

Michelle lives in Melbourne, Australia, with Craig and their dog, Barney.

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A book is never written alone. It is the culmination of insights, ideas and inspiration from many sources.

To the many people throughout my career who have shaped my leadership vision and helped me get places I'd never have imagined I could go, thank you! To my clients, who are a constant source of inspiration and connection, I consider myself privileged to work with you. To my brother-in-law, Warwick Parer, who came up with the initial title of this book, thanks for the suggestion.

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Most of all thanks to my husband, Craig Salisbury, who when I announced I was going to write my third book, once again gave me his wholehearted support. I couldn't do this without your love, care and backing.



# PREFACE

Fictionalised in movies, but all too real in offices, factories and worksites around the world, we've all worked for one—the bad boss.

They're disorganised or dysfunctional or they can't control their temper. They steal your ideas and rarely if ever acknowledge or appreciate your efforts. Worse still are the bullies who intimidate you and generally make your working life hell.

From Gordon Gecko in *Wall Street* to Mr Burns in *The Simpsons*, a bad boss story makes for good drama and even comedy, but in life it's no fun. It can be downright miserable. You probably remember *The Devil Wears Prada*, in which the main protagonist and horrible boss Miranda Priestly, immortalised on the silver screen by Meryl Streep, torments her long-suffering assistant Andy, played by Anne Hathaway. This story (like so many movies) began life as a book, and at the time I read it, it all felt a little too close to home, because I felt like I was working for a male version of Miranda Priestly, and it was taking a toll on my wellbeing.

A bad boss makes you dread going to work,  
impacts your self-esteem and, over time,  
affects your mental health.

Oddly, though, I wouldn't be where I am now if I hadn't gone through that turbulence. I was fortunate because I had supportive people around me who helped me navigate my way through.

In the end, the role was pivotal in shaping and elevating my career choices. (And it now provides great content and lessons for a book like this!)

## Confessions of a bad boss

I've also been privileged to have worked with amazing leaders who set the standard for the type of leader I wanted to be. They challenged how I saw my

role as a leader. They inspired me to do better. Leaders are not all, or always, 'bad'. But I do have a confession to make.

You see, I was once one of those horrible bosses.

I didn't yell or scream or throw my handbag or other objects at people (as Miranda did), but I could make life really hard for my team. I was often relentless on expectations and workload, and I kept my team members at a distance. I didn't have enough time for them, nor did I try to get to know them.

When I was promoted into that management role—I'd be stretching the truth to call myself a leader back then—I had no idea what I was doing. I loved the *idea* of being someone others looked to for direction, but I simply wasn't equipped with the leadership skills to actually *be* that someone. I made it up as I went along, with a few hits and many misses.

Like most people, I didn't deliberately set out to be a bad boss ... I just didn't know any better.

Perfectionism and ambition are a toxic combination. I didn't want to admit to my boss that I couldn't do something or to deliver substandard work, so there was always pressure to perform, and I would set a cracking pace. When the pressure of the work environment got to me, I passed it down the line, so the pressure on team increased too. My team members were exhausted. Sadly, I was blind to this impact.

One day, just after my team and I had come off a massive project, I was sitting at my desk and muttered, half to myself, 'I'm so glad that's done. I'm stuffed.' To which one of my team members responded, 'Thank god there's an off switch.' Surprised, I asked what she meant. She said, 'Your energy levels and drive are so high. Your capacity for work is relentless. It's impossible for us to keep up with you. It's good to see you get tired too.'

In hindsight, I shouldn't have been surprised, yet I was.

Thankfully, with a lot of work and coaching I improved. It didn't happen overnight. It started with an awareness of the impact I was having and a desire to do better, then having people around me who could help me see myself more clearly.

I learned over the years to get explicit with my team about how I work, and to ask for their help to slow me down. I learned that the more open I was with

my team about my own limitations and strengths, the more we brought out the best in each other. I also learned that the more the team connected with me on a human level, and I with them, the better we worked together.

I built lasting friendships and connections that enabled us to do more and be more.

## Why this book and why now

Since leaving corporate I've worked with hundreds of leaders across the private and public sectors, and at all levels of organisations. What I see time and time again is good people in tough (and even horrible) situations. The most frequent complaint or challenge they confront is their relationship with their boss.

When I talk with the boss, their most frequent complaint or challenge is their relationship with *their* boss, the challenges in the team along with ever tighter deadlines, increasing expectations and unrealistic workloads.

When I talk with the boss's boss, their lament is the rumbles they hear about things not working, and again the challenges of a work environment that is tough (at one end of the spectrum) to toxic (at the other end). Where they face worries on multiple fronts, not least in relation to job security, performance, outcomes and reputation, and also express fears and frustrations about their relationships.

Everyone reports to someone and everyone faces challenges!

This book isn't a bitch-fest about bastard leaders  
or a litany of bad boss stories. Rather,  
it's a book about hope.

The world desperately needs good leaders. Leaders who will challenge the standard orthodoxy of leadership practices in organisations. Leaders who are willing to tackle the big issues we face as humans. Leaders who want to bring out the best in their team because they know that when their team members thrive, everyone benefits.

At the same time, the world needs happy, healthy and engaged workers who bring their whole and best selves to work every day. Workers who do their best and are at their best.

Call me optimistic or naïve, but I don't believe that most people who are classified as 'bad' bosses or leaders intend to be bad (unless, of course, they're a corporate psychopath who takes pleasure in other people's pain and in making their working life a misery, but there aren't so many of those!).

## How to use this book

Creating an environment where employees and leaders flourish is a team effort. So regardless of your role—be it employee, boss or leader, boss's boss or leader of leaders—this book encourages you to play your part. It challenges you to critically examine your role in the dynamic, and to own what you can do to shift your relationship and make it work. This is not about settling scores or getting even; it's about moving forward productively and positively. It's about building your awareness, creating and implementing effective strategies, and reflecting on your progress.

No one chooses to be classified as a 'bad boss'. If you're in a role where you work for someone you deem to be one, then you may be tempted to think, 'This is all about them, and not about me.' Not so fast!

Relationships are both an individual and a team effort. Look at any team sport to see how everyone plays a part. Regardless of the role or title you hold, on or off the field, how you behave influences whether that experience is positive or negative. The same applies in the working world.

In this book you'll read real-life stories of employees who have reshaped their situation, bosses who have changed how they lead, and bosses of leaders who have opened their eyes to the role they need to play to build a better culture.

You'll see the good, the bad and the ugly. To protect the innocent the names in the *On the field* stories have been altered. You'll see change is possible, relationships can be improved and there is always choice and hope.

There are things in our work life we may not like (or be proud of), but it's up to us to acknowledge our part, learn from our experiences and be willing to evolve. I hope this book will challenge and guide you to a new way of thinking and being, regardless of your role.

You may be tempted to focus only on the part of the book you feel most resonates with you; however, I highly recommend you first read all three parts.

For example, as an employee, you may not manage other people, so you're tempted to read only Part I. However, you'll find reading about what is

going on for your boss, manager or leader in Part III will help you improve your situation.

Or you may find yourself managing an ineffective leader, so you skip to Part II. Yet if you read Part III you may discover that your behaviour is contributing to the poor dynamic, and that without realising it you have become that leader's 'bad boss', which means you will need to do some work on yourself using Part III before you can expect them to change.

To be successful, to come out the other end in a better position than you are in now, you need to understand the challenges and opportunities from all three perspectives.

This means you need to be open to challenging your perspective about what is really going on before you can determine your best approach and take action. That's why you'll be asked regularly to take *Time out* to consider a few pertinent questions as you progress through the book.

So read and reflect, and above all play nice and have a laugh! Sometimes we can be horrified when we hold up a mirror and see clearly how we have been contributing to our own problems. But it's not the end of the world. The fact you're reading this demonstrates that you want to do something to improve your situation.

Making real change takes time, patience and practice, so if you need further help and guidance implementing the actions, there are additional resources to help you at:

[michellegibbings.com/resources](http://michellegibbings.com/resources)

Now let's get to work to make your workplace work for you!



# INTRODUCTION

First, we need to set the scene of the modern workplace. It's an environment that is constantly shifting on every front—except one. The relationship dynamics that occur across the organisation will be a primary source of either irritation or inspiration.

Organisations are based on relationships, and understanding how they work is crucial if you are to thrive rather than merely survive. All work environments have rules of behaviour and standard operating procedures, although they are usually not set down in print. Sometimes these rules are helpful; at other times they do little more than perpetuate stereotypes and myths.

Before we go any further, let's dig into the reality of today's working world, and set the framework you will use to advance your relationships and position on the field.

When woken by that early-morning alarm at the start of another week, do you jump out of bed and think, 'Hooray, it's Monday!', or do you roll over, hit the snooze button and wish it was Saturday?

Your reaction is in large part determined by the relationships you have at work. You don't need research studies to tell you that you are far more likely to enjoy going to work if you work with people you like and have a positive and healthy relationship with your boss.

Sadly, the reality is that for many of us, our working environment isn't much fun, and in extreme cases can actually be damaging our health.

You know it's true: People don't leave their job,  
they leave their boss.

In May 2019, the 194 members of the World Health Organization (WHO) unanimously agreed to amend the International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems to classify professional burnout as a recognised illness. The WHO defines professional burnout as 'a syndrome conceptualised as resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed'.

Beyond Blue's landmark 2017 study 'State of Workplace Mental Health in Australia' found that:

- 52 per cent of employees believe their workplace is mentally healthy
- 56 per cent believe their most senior leader values mental health
- 21 per cent had taken time off work in the prior 12 months because they felt stressed, anxious, depressed or mentally unhealthy.

Supporting these findings, a PwC report into the costs of mental health concluded that absenteeism costs Australian businesses about \$4.7 billion every year. Presenteeism, where people are less productive in their role due to mental health issues, costs around \$6.1 billion a year, and compensation claims cost an estimated \$146 million a year.

The employee–boss dynamic also impacts workplace productivity and culture, and ultimately organisational outcomes. The Great Place to Work Institute found that trust between managers and employees is a defining characteristic of organisations listed in their annual '100 Best Companies to Work for' list. Similarly, a study by Alex Edmans, Professor of Finance at the London Business School, found that the top companies to work for increased their share value by 50 per cent.

Regardless of where you sit in the organisational hierarchy, you have a boss (whether a manager, CEO or Board), and your relationship with them impacts your productivity, satisfaction levels, wellbeing and career prospects either positively or negatively.

So it's in everyone's best interests for  
relationships at work to, well, work.

Why is this easier said than done?

## **The leadership deficit**

Search the business archives and read the business press and you'll find a long litany of organisations—think Tyco, Enron, HIH, James Hardie, WorldCom, Satyam and more—that eventually self-destructed because of toxic leadership and unethical cultures. In Australia, the Financial Services Royal Commission, established in late 2017, uncovered many examples of questionable corporate practices.

We are passing through a period of history the World Economic Forum has dubbed 'the Fourth Industrial Revolution'. Leaders and bosses are urged to