



By Sam

When faced with a toxic leader, you can find multiple studies and a massive amount of information on what can be done to deal with this individual, but what happens when you have a boss who is just plain ineffective? They aren't a bad person but they are a bad boss and what's worse, they are in charge. They are approachable, they seem to be open to feedback however, despite feedback points and development sessions, the problems still persist.

It is easy to wallow in negativity when faced with this situation but with each challenge, the opportunity for development is available. When I experienced this scenario, I learned lessons and developed coping mechanisms that I now wish I had from the beginning to help me manage the situation better.

This list is not exhaustive and I am sure there are more methods out there, but you will find the most important lessons I learned below:

**You can't change them.** You can try but it won't work. Ultimately you are subordinate to them and their failure to develop as a leader and professional is either the result of their own limitations or lack of development from their boss or previous bosses. You need to realize this early on and decide how best to manage the situation from your vantage point down the chain.

**Knowledge is power.** Leadership by wandering around is a great tool but so is following by wandering around. When communication fails, you can glean information by just being present either at meetings or by casual 'drive-by' desk calls with various leaders up the chain of command. Ask the boss questions, book a weekly desk call in the battle rhythm and ask what is coming from the higher-ups to their desk. You can also request oversight of higher-level issues - identify these as personal development opportunities. Be aware of the pressures and deadlines likely to embarrass the unit and tap into tools that will assist you in setting time aside to discuss the progress of various projects to maintain awareness.

**Know the boss' strengths and weaknesses.** They don't answer emails, they hold on to soldiers' assignments, they forget to attend meetings, you don't know where they are, and you have no idea what they are doing. However, they may be excellent at information management and thrive on the staff paper, planning, etc. Find out their strengths and volunteer yourself to cover the gaps that they have in their arsenal. You don't have to do their job but use your capacity to find the gaps and exploit the opportunity to under-promise and over deliver.

**Empathy.** It's easy to be overwhelmed by cynicism but there is a saying that people are "promoted to their level of incompetence." Maybe you haven't reached that point yet, but

they have and so will you one day. Be supportive, be a follower and be helpful. It's not your boss' fault they have been placed in a role in which they are unsuited to perform.

**Leadership and Loyalty.** Never let your own criticisms be vocalized to your subordinates and never join in their criticisms of the boss. If they come to you, make sure they voice their concerns in private and keep it constructive. Take their concerns for action, acknowledge their issues and complaints, and provide a solution to assist within your own power. Finally, when your senior rater asks you where your boss is, be honest. They are likely asking you for a reason. If you don't know where the boss is, tell them. If they ask you for feedback, be constructive and have evidence. Your soldiers deserve leaders they can rely on. You need to be loyal to the chain of command, but you also need to be loyal to your soldiers and keep their best interests in mind. Your boss may be ineffective and disengaged, but these lessons will make sure your leader remains well respected and the honor of your unit intact.

*Sam is a Captain in the UK military with 12 years' experience in personnel, staff, recruitment, ops planning and defence engagement. She has served 4 operational tours in Afghanistan and the Broader Middle East including in NATO and Coalition HQs.*

Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [LinkedIn](#)
- [Pinterest](#)