

Help: My Boss Has ATTENTION DEFICIT DISORDER!!

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Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder or ADHD is associated with three themes: inattentiveness, impulsivity, and hyperactivity. In most cases, all three behaviors can be observed.

Depending on the individual, some themes are going to be stronger than others.



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Current research suggests that ADHD is a neurologically based disability that is genetically transmitted. (CDC, 2005)

Fayyad et al (2007) administered a screening tool for ADHD on 11,422 people in ten countries between the ages of 18-44 years:

In the developing world, the prevalence of AD/HD was 1.9% of those surveyed. In the developed world, however, the frequency was 4.2%.

ADHD is not correlated with IQ. Expect to encounter very smart people with the disability.

And because ADHD is associated with intense (but brief) cognitive focus, there are some high functioning senior executives with ADHD:

They function best in situations where their drive and intensity can be put to good business use. Sales is a good example. But we work with a high functioning ADHD CEOs. They lead the charge for new ideas and generate high voltage excitement with stakeholders.

If supported by a calm person who can manage the details, they can be successful.

One of our most successful clients was the CEO of a Fortune 100 Company. Based on our work with high functioning ADHD CEOs, below are some practical suggestions for managing your boss.

Is Your Boss Aware of the Disorder?

At senior levels, the boss' tendencies towards decisions and short attention span is the talk of the C-Suite.

In one of our cases, the SVP acknowledged his short attention span and ease of distractibility that led him to be late for nearly every staff meeting. But he did not tie it to a neurobiological issue. We gently inquired about his children and he mentioned that his oldest son was diagnosed with ADHD. This gave us the opportunity to talk about the genetic basis of ADHD.

He was tested and his ADHD was confirmed. This SVP was relieved because he could attribute his chronic lateness to an inherited neurological problem. This implied he had no moral causality. He could see himself and his son as victims.

Context, Context, Context

Larry Kaye is an executive coach who works with teams. He recommends working with your boss in trying to focus on the situational forces that result in poor work-related behavior.

Does the behavior tend to come up more in face-to-face or virtual discussions? Does the behavior come up more when there is time pressure or not?

Once there is a mutual diagnosis of the context, work with the leader in developing action plans for those specific times likely to generate lack of focus. For example:

If the situation tends to be chronic inability to terminate meetings then make sure the executive assistant can be counted upon to stick his head in and say, “Sorry but it is time to go.”

If the leader does not have an executive assistant, ask the leader to schedule two alerts on the mobile phone. The first one to inform the leader when the meeting is scheduled to be over in 15 minutes and the second one informing all parties in the meeting that “It is Time to Stop.”

Assume that the problem comes up when the leader feels under time pressure:

Never schedule back-to-back meetings. Always have 15 minute “personal space” between one meeting and the next.

When Meeting with Your Boss, Present a One Page Agenda.

Some of your meetings with the boss are initiated by you and some are initiated by your boss. Never assume that the boss knows the agenda for the meeting even if the boss initiated it.

Adults with ADHD have deficits with short term memory. This implies that your boss can call you in for a meeting. You show up as scheduled, wondering what is going on. The boss does not remember why you are in her office (Brown, 2006).

What happens next? Rather than admitting ignorance, your boss might start talking about the first thing that comes to her mind. You leave the room feeling “side swiped” by “left field” issues the boss has brought up.

A quiet way of dealing with this is to ask the boss the purpose of the meeting and then present a one-page agenda item when you show up. This presents the side issues from coming up.

Let's Take a Walk

When the boss is “on,” you feel like the most important person in the world to the boss. But it is difficult to sustain that level of intensity for long. Their attention can and will shift.

According to the research on ADHD, sitting still and listening to others is associated with difficulties in sustaining alertness (Brown, 2006). They need to feel themselves in motion. Indeed, sometimes they misdiagnose themselves as suffering from “fatigue” when the reality is that they have been sitting too long.

We recommend you try to orchestrate “walking meetings:”

Stybel Peabody had an office near a river. We would organize walking meetings along the river bank. Paradoxically people are apt to be more comfortable in discussing important things if they cannot read the reaction on your face.

And ADHD leaders are more comfortable when in motion.

Use the Colombo Technique

In the daily stress of business, most of us intellectually understand the difference between strategy and tactics. The distinction is difficult for the ADHD boss. For example:

The boss came up with a new revenue source that involved thousands of users on a global basis. But his operational plan implied that the boss alone would decide who qualifies to get into the program. And this defeat the idea of creating scale.

It is not uncommon for the boss to introduce a tactical concept that is 180 degrees contradictory from the strategic objectives of the new idea. The boss is unaware of the discrepancy but everyone else sees it.

“Can You Help Me Out?”

From 1968 to 2003, character actor Peter Falk played Los Angeles Detective Colombo in a much beloved television series called “Colombo.” Falk won the Golden Globe and two Emmy Awards. There a statue in Budapest, Hungary in honor of the character.

If Sherlock Holmes was the smartest detective in any room, Colombo as portrayed by Peter Falk would come across as the most confused person in the room.

Viewers would laugh as Colombo would scratch his head and say, “There is something puzzling me. Can you help me out?” They would laugh because the audience knew Colombo really was not “puzzled.” He was being strategic in his use of questions.

The Colombo technique with the ADHD Boss who goes off on tangents would be to say:

“Can you help me out? There is something I don’t understand. You want this program to be scaled on a global basis. But you are the one approving the people who are admitted into the program. Given your busy schedule, am I correct in assuming you don’t want it scaled?”

Notice the absence of accusation.

In a business context, the Colombo technique allows you to get the boss back on a strategic focus without accusing the boss of having lost that focus.

“We Make a Great Team”

Kim Miller, Ph.D. is a psychologist in private practice in New York City. She says, “I once had a colleague who was ADHD. My style is to be very detail oriented. And her style was to provide flashes of insight, a sense of possibilities, and a sense of urgency.”

“We made a great team. I provided her with structure, which she needed. And she provided more creativity than I had. When both parties can understand they are deriving mutual benefit, it helps.”

Control What You Can Control

In the end, you have little control over your boss' behavior.

You can only control your reactions to that behavior.

And the best way to react to ADHD behavior is to create structure for the benefit of everyone on the team.

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Kim Miller, Personal Conversation, 2015

Larry Kaye, Personal Conversation,2015

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