

CUBICLE CULTURE

By JARED SANDBERG

Some Bosses Never Meet a Success That Isn't Theirs

LOTS OF PEOPLE are willing to heap praise on Noah Stern—but not always his bosses.

Twenty years ago, the 40-year-old worked as an accounting clerk for a boss who didn't do a stitch of work. But the boss always told the company's president that he did whatever task was in the spotlight, Mr. Stern says. He felt powerless: "My only real option was to leave." So he went to college.

Then he went to work for an oil company where the editor of its newsletter, hard-pressed to come up with a story, put her byline on his work. "It was just so petty, it was unbelievable," Mr. Stern fumes. So he went to grad school.

Then at Kraft Foods, he ended up doing a lot of computer support. His boss would pillage him for answers to users' problems and proudly deliver solutions "without ever acknowledging where the answer came from," says Mr. Stern. Without another higher education option, he went on to a new job.



Rozanna Bikadoroff

Call them pickpockets of praise: supervisors who take all of their employees' credit, but none of the blame. Un-

abashed, they do it right before your eyes, their cons going unchecked for years. Flashier examples of corporate sleaze abound these days, but this brand of fraud is everywhere. Few workplace conflicts can whip employees into more of a huff than a boss hopped up on someone else's glory.

VICTIMS OF THIS abuse, with little recourse against a person who has his thumb on their career, future and inner peace, face a grin-and-bear-it agony. Like David Molinaro, whose heist took place in broad daylight.

Eight years ago, he was a computer analyst in Pittsburgh, at a place that handles billing for health-care companies. One customer called him to complain that Medicare reimbursed him a sum that didn't add up. He and his boss tried to figure out the problem until she headed for lunch. In the meantime, he crunched numbers and figured out that Medicare made a rare mistake. He told his boss about his finding, and suddenly it was hers.

She even boasted to her vice president in a meeting the next day. "I was horrified," Mr. Molinaro recalls slowly and loudly, as if he were speaking from behind a locked door. "She didn't even bat an eye!"

Paul Lapidus, director of Kennesaw State University's Corporate Governance Center, estimates that as many as 80% of workers experience this indignity sometime in their career, based on informal surveys of his students. It breeds distrust, torpedoes motivation and is sometimes misperceived as a perk of power.

Bosses should take note, says Prof. Lapidus: "You never lose any credit by giving it away."

Some experts prescribe 360° feedback—anonymous reviews of a boss from various people above and below him—to help ferret out the weasels. But not everyone has this means of authorized tattling.

Credit-thieves manage upward very well, says Peter J. Frost, a professor of organizational behavior at the University of British Columbia. "They look good to their bosses but they're s.o.b.s to the people below them." Take the matter over their heads and you can hit a dead end with the boss's supervisor, who isn't always friendly toward evidence of his own lousy management.

"The manager's manager has a certain amount of denial," says Prof. Frost. His book "Toxic Emotions at Work" addresses managers' Seven Deadly INs (insensitivity, incompetence, infidelity, etc.), but he says there is no good short-term solution. In the long run, an e-mail trail helps. "People need to build their case and do the CC'ing," he says.

SOME VICTIMS cry to human resources, but HR may not believe you. David Crisp, former senior vice president of human resources for a major Canadian retailer, says "at most, 25% of people complaining are right" that their boss ripped them off.

Mr. Crisp advises employees to talk to their bosses. Don't fly off the handle or start pointing fingers. Bring evidence if you have it, refer loosely to your understanding of an idea's chain of custody, but talk more directly about your desire to be more involved.

But this can amount to a sit-down between hens and foxes. Two weeks ago, Amanda Ogilvie, a 22-year-old business student who works as a veterinary-lab technician in the Atlanta area had just completed more than three weeks of work on a training manual for co-workers. On her own time, she included color, photographs and charts. When the clinic's owner came by and saw it, a vet took full credit.

Ms. Ogilvie, who says she has a "bad red-headed temper," approached him, asking, "What is your problem?" When she explained why she was upset, he replied, "Why do you need to take credit for this? This is a medical field and you're a business student."

Just weeks away from leaving her job, Ms. Ogilvie, who kick-boxes to relieve her frustrations, opted to drop the issue—instead of her boss with a boot to the solar plexus. "Later, I thought of the fact that I could kick his butt if I wanted to," she says. "But at the moment, I was too stunned to even think about that."

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