

My Boss Has ADHD: Now What?

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder or ADHD is associated with three themes:

Inattentiveness
Impulsivity
hyperactivity.

In most cases, all three behaviors can be observed.

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 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 intelligence. We work with MANY smart business leaders who have ADHD.

But....

ADHD is associated with intense (but brief) focus, ADHD leaders function best in sales/marketing situations where their drive and intensity can be put to good business use. IF they learn to partner with someone who can manage the details the ADHD leader overlooks, they become a winning team.

In the absence of a pragmatic and detail-oriented partner, the company can lurch from crisis to crisis and always focus on the Next Big Thing of the moment. You can't grow a business this way.

The purpose of this piece is to provide you with practical suggestions for managing your ADHD boss so you, your boss, and your organization emerge as triple winners.

Is Your Boss Public with the ADHD Diagnosis?

At senior levels of management, behavioral tendencies towards impulsive decision making and a short but intense attention span are apt to be the talk of the company. If the boss acknowledges this behavior and self-describes herself as ADHD then the rest of the suggestions in this article might be of value.

In one of our cases, a 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, thinking it was an intellectual deficit or a moral failure on his part. We gently inquired about the health of 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 and to recommend he be tested.

We arranged for an evaluation and his ADHD was confirmed. This SVP was relieved because an inherited neurological problem. This implied he had no moral causality. He could see himself as a victim.

Assuming that ADHD is discussable, consider some of the suggestions below. Even if ADHD is not discussable, the use of some of these techniques might help you manage your stress.

Context, Context, Context

Larry Kaye is both 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 example,

If the situation tends to be chronic inability to arrive on time for meetings, then make a plan in advance to have the executive assistant stick his head in the door fifteen minutes before the official end of a meeting and say, "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.”

For another example, make sure that the leader schedules a 15 minute “personal space” between one meeting and the next. The leader needs time to go to the rest room, make phone calls, or just take a breath.

When Meeting with Your Boss, Walk In With a One Page Agenda.

Do not assume that the boss knows the agenda for the meeting even if the boss initiated it.

Adults with ADHD have normal long-term memories. They have deficits with short term memory. For example:

The boss called you in for a meeting. You show up as scheduled. And the boss does not remember why you are in her office. (Brown, 2006). When that happens, your boss may start “faking it” rather than admitting ignorance to you. 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 present the boss with a one-page agenda of what you know or assume this meeting is all about.

If your agenda is out of place, the boss will correct you.

If your agenda is in line with what the boss planned to discuss, the two of you now have a road map to follow.

If the boss forgot why the boss called you into the meeting, the boss can quietly accept your agenda as the boss’ agenda. The two of you have a road map to follow.

We suggest using the agenda technique as part of your new routine. You can justify doing it on the grounds of saving time by organizing issues for discussion. If you present a one-page outline at some meetings but not others, it can get confusing.

Let’s Take a Walk

When the boss is “on,” you feel like the most important person in the world to the boss. That is why ADHD leaders can do a great job in sales. 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 and have been quiet for too long.

We recommend you try to orchestrate “walking meetings.” This creates physical movement for all parties.

For example, we had an office near the Charles River in the Boston, Massachusetts area. 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.

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. Keeping the two issues distinct is difficult.

This common problem is far more acute for the ADHD boss.

The boss may have a grand strategy of “scaling” a program to thousands of users on a global basis. But the boss then wants to decide who gets into the program.

You know the boss has gone off on a tangent and that tangent is 180 degrees different than the strategic objectives of the program.

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. The statue is an example of how universally appealing the character is.

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. He was physically underwhelming: he walked with a slight stoop, rarely combed his hair, and wore a rumpled rain coat. Viewers would laugh as he 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.” His “confusion” was a pose.

Here is an example of applying the Colombo technique with the ADHD Boss:

“Can you help me out here? There is something I don’t understand. You want this program to be scaled on a global basis. But you want to be the one approving the people who are admitted into the program. So does that mean you don’t want it scaled? Or you don’t want to sleep? Can you help me out?”

Notice the absence of accusation through the employment of “confusion.”

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

Avoid Sherlock Holmes.

Sherlock Holmes plays “gotcha” to show the world he is the smartest person in the room. That technique may have worked for a private detective in the 19th Century. It doesn’t help build a team in the 21st Century.

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 the creativity I needed. 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 and cannot influence the ADHD. It is what it is.

You can only control your reactions to your boss’ behavior.

And you can propose structure. The ideas in this paper focus on structures you can create to help work move smoother. And if you come in armed with structure, you may find that this helps calm your boss.

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Kim Miller, Personal Conversation, 2015

Larry Kaye, Personal Conversation, 2015

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