Intro

The movie Horrible Bosses is about three friends who each have a boss that makes their work life miserable in some way. One night, after a bunch of beers, they decide that the only way that they will be able to rid themselves of the problem is to kill their bosses. They laugh about it as a joke to begin with, but it eventually sounds like the only option. They spend the remainder of the movie trying to devise a plan to kill each of their bosses without leaving any evidence. Since none of them are criminals, they obviously lack the expertise in illegal activity. They even go so far as to hire a consultant to help them devise a plan. The movie has a number of ethical dilemmas. Aside from the big one about plotting murders, the others generally revolve around power. The power that is controlled at the top of organizations, and the viewpoint from the employees who feel they have no control. These are very real dilemmas that most people deal with on a regular basis. They just take it to an extra level to sensationalize it and then introduce the question of “where does an employee draw the line?” and “what recourse does an employee have when their boss is exhibiting too much power?”. We discuss those a little more in depth below.

Business World Portrayal

The business world is portrayed in a very negative light. The movie seeks to show the extreme versions of how power is held at the top of organizations, and how employees generally feel helpless to that power. In the real world, this is generally how it works. Most bosses aren’t this extreme with the way they display their power, but I’m sure there are examples that are at least this bad, and worse. Employees, especially those in the low to middle class, have very little power over their situation on a daily basis. Their control is even lower when the economy is bad. Many employees are forced to stay in bad situations because it will be very difficult to find new
employment. In the movie, that plays into the decision to kill their bosses. They start talking about getting new jobs while having a couple beers, and then a friend joins the conversation and tells them how difficult it is to find a job in a bad economy.

There are three important business ethics dilemmas that are introduced in the movie. The first is about sexual harassment, the second is deceit, and the third is discrimination. Those are all discussed in depth in the next section.

_business Ethics Dilemmas_

_Sexual Harassment_

The first ethics dilemma to discuss is sexual harassment. Sexual harassment has been a problem for a very long time, and continues as a problem today. The biggest change in sexual harassment is that it used to be only possible for it to be a male harassing a female. With movements in equality, the roles have been reversed in some instance.

In our movie, one of the employees, Dale, is a male employee that is sexually harassed daily by his female boss. He is in a committed relationship and she uses that against him, threatening to tell his fiancé if he doesn’t play along with her fantasies. Due to a criminal record, it is very difficult for him to find employment anywhere else, so he doesn’t feel as though he has any control.

When he confronts her, she shows him provocative pictures that she took of him while he was sedated. She threatens to take them to his fiancé if he tries to say no to her.

Originally he comes to the conclusion that his only option is to kill her. At the end of the movie he sets her up to be videotaped in a compromising situation with a patient. She falls into the trap and he uses it to have some power over her. That approach has its own ethical boundary
questions, but it was really the only way to make the situation go away. The boss, a dentist in this instance, of a small organization doesn’t generally have anyone to answer to internally, so the only other recourse that he might have had would be to get her in trouble with the law. Those cases are extremely difficult to prove.

I would likely have handled it in the same way that he did and record her propositioning him in order to make sure that she doesn’t have all of the power over him. I believe that as long as he only uses the recording to keep her from harassing him, then he isn’t acting unethically. If he goes to the next step and uses the recording to bribe her and take advantage of her, he is acting unethically.

Discrimination

The second ethical dilemma is based around the abuse of power from authority. The other two main characters, Nick and Kurt, have bosses that view themselves as being better than everyone else, and they have no respect for others around them. The first boss, Pellet, becomes the owner of the chemical company Kurt works for after his dad has a heart attack and dies. Kurt liked the father, and enjoyed working for him. The son believes he is privileged and that he is superior to everyone that works for him. Pellet openly discriminates against his employees. He tells Kurt that he has to fire one of two people, either the “cripple” or the “fatty”. He also says that he wants to squeeze all of the profits out of the company and move away. In order to do that, he is willing to discontinue the responsible chemical disposal that the company has practiced for years.

Again, it is decided that it would be too difficult to find new jobs in a tough economy, so the best alternative to handle the bosses is to murder them. He even goes as far as to say that it would be
the “greater good” if they killed him. They start by digging for evidence in their bosses’ houses. They end up stealing Pellet’s phone and then losing it in Harkin’s house. Harkin assumes that Pellet is having an affair with his wife, so he goes and shoots him. The problem for Kurt is solved because someone has now killed his boss that drove him to believe murder was the only option.

Obviously, murder is never the correct answer to a workplace dispute. The problem is, there isn’t many ways to deal with a boss who doesn’t report to anyone, and who believes his opinion is the only one that counts. I believe that Kurt should have worked to convince Pellet that he could move to the beach now, and that Kurt would manage the business and he could just collect the ownership checks on the beach. Kurt manages the business and keeps everyone employed, Pellet is no longer involved. That is the way I would have tried to handle the situation.

Deceit

The final boss, Harkin, uses manipulation and lies to get employees to work extra hard, with no real intention of giving Nick the promotion that he promised. He manipulated him into drinking scotch in the morning and then used it against him. All of these are ways to motivate employees to work extra hard in the short term, but they are unethical and eventually end up with resentment.

After Harkin murders Pellet, the cops eventually arrest him for murder. Nick’s problem is solved with Harkin in prison.

In an organization like that, it seems that the CEO could have been approachable. Nick should have tried to approach the CEO instead of formulating a plot to kill his boss.

Summary
There were numerous other business ethics examples brought up in this movie. The most obvious one isn’t directly a business ethics dilemma, but a general ethics dilemma. A plot to murder your boss is overly extreme. There should always be a better way to deal with a situation. There were also ethical dilemmas with their choice of a consultant to teach them how to commit a crime. They took a few words of his, and made the assumption that he murdered someone. It turned out his history was much less violent. They paid him a lot of money for something he knew nothing about, just because he was a black guy in a bar who had been to prison. There were also a number of not business related ethical dilemmas, such as infidelity when Kurt has an affair with Harkin’s wife.

The movie is a comical work of fiction. They are presenting some real topics in a humorous way to get laughs. In reality, these are very real things that people deal with daily. After giving it some thought, I’m very fortunate that I’ve never been in a situation like the ones displayed here. When working for a small, private, organization, there are not a lot of avenues to solve problems. And I’m sure that it seems like they don’t have many options other than to just deal with it. It makes me aware that when leading an organization, I want all of my employees to feel comfortable. It is important to put in place ways for people to voice displeasure without the fear of backlash against them. I will definitely take that into consideration throughout my career.

Resources