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HELP!

**MY BOSS HAS ATTENTION DEFICIT
HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER (ADHD).**

Learn the Colombo Technique.

We work with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) executives all the time.

Indeed, there are many high functioning ADHD leaders in business and politics.

Many of these clients are incredibly smart. Their drive and intensity can be put to good business use as long as they are backed by someone who manages the details.

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

Three Themes:

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder or ADHD is associated with three themes: inattentiveness, impulsivity, and hyperactivity. In most cases, all three behaviors can be observed. With your own boss, some themes are going to be stronger than others.



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. These people were located in ten countries. 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%.

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.

He was tested 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 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 terminate meetings so that the leader arrives on time for the next scheduled meeting, then make sure the executive assistant is quietly forceful about sticking his head in the door and saying "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, if the behavior tends to come up during time pressure, then schedule back-to-back meetings so that there is a 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 normal long term memories but they have deficits with short term memory. Thus it can be the case that 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 her 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.

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. Keeping the two issues distinct is difficult when in the midst of action.

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

For example the boss may have a strategy of “scaling” a program to hundreds of users on a global basis. But the boss then goes on a tangent for a tactic that suggests the boss alone decides 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.

“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. 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.” 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 here? 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. So that means you don't want it scaled? Can you help me out?"

Notice the absence of accusation. This is important in working with the ADHD boss.

The Colombo technique is the strategic employment of "confusion" to make a point.

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

We find that many of our clients tend to gravitate towards Detective Colombo or Sherlock Holmes.

What is your style?

Sherlock Holmes plays "gotcha" to provide 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.

Peter Falk's Detective Colombo is both underwhelming and effective. If you have not seen "Colombo" the television show, check it out on Netflix.

"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 the creativity, which I needed. When both parties can understand they are deriving mutual benefit, it helps."

Can you say to your ADHD boss, “We make a great team. You have insights I do not have and I have the focus on details you lack.” If your boss agrees, then you have the basis of mutual respect.

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 the behavior.

And you can propose structure.

The ideas in this paper focus on structures you can create.

Come in with structure. Structure helps calm your boss.

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Kim Miller, Personal Conversation, 2015

Larry Kaye, Personal Conversation, 2015

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Maryanne Peabody and Larry Stybel are co-founders of Boston-based Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc., an Arbora Global Company. Clients include 21% of the one hundred companies named "Best Employers in the United States." Its mission is "Leadership and Career Success:" retained search, coaching, and outplacement for senior leaders.

There are 500 Arbora Global consultants in 25 U.S. cities and 30 countries.

Each month **PSYCHOLOGY TODAY** publishes Stybel Peabody's perspectives about career management and leadership success:

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