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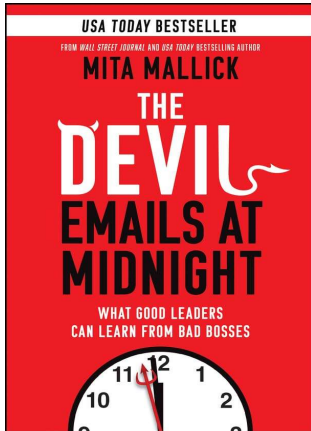
Book Review

Debunking the Myth of the Born Leader: Critique of Dysfunctional Organizational Culture and Toxic Leadership

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews ‘*The Devil Emails at Midnight: What Good Leaders Can Learn from Bad*



Bosses’ by Mita Mallick. Positioned at the intersection of organizational behavior, workplace psychology, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), Mallick’s work challenges the conventional ‘bad apple’ paradigm of toxic management. By delineating thirteen distinct archetypes of counterproductive managerial behavior, the book explores how systemic pressures, corporate incentives, and unresolved individual trauma converge to cultivate toxic leadership and hostile organizational culture.

Utilizing a creative nonfiction methodology anchored in autoethnographic narrative and empirical corporate observation, Mallick provides a powerful framework for structural interventions at the corporate offices and shop floors. This review interrogates the theoretical underpinnings of her archetypes, contextualizes her work within contemporary management literature, and discusses the implications of her insights for modern organizational governance, employee retention, and leadership development.

KEYWORDS: Toxic Leadership, Employee Retention, Employee Wellbeing, Leadership Development

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Book: The Devil Emails at Midnight: What Good Leaders Can Learn from Bad Bosses

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In modern organizational studies, toxic management is frequently analyzed through a highly individualized lens. Traditional frameworks often rely on corporate pathology or individual personality defects such as the ‘Dark Triad’ of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy to explain toxic behavior. While these psychological profiles are certainly useful, they often fail to capture how everyday corporate ecosystems methodically create, incentivize, and protect bad managers. Mita Mallick’s *The Devil Emails at Midnight: What Good Leaders Can Learn from Bad Bosses* offers a decisive contribution to this discourse. Mallick shifts the analytical lens from innate individual pathology to environmental and systemic conditioning. Her core premise is as straightforward as it is profound: bad bosses are not born; they are systematically made by the structural realities, misaligned incentives, and stress-driven cultures of contemporary corporate spaces.

The book serves as both a systemic exposé and a diagnostic tool for modern leadership and toxic organizational culture. Mallick utilizes her extensive corporate experience to taxonomize thirteen specific personas of dysfunctional management. In doing so, she avoids the trap of purely speculative or academic abstraction, instead grounding her analysis in qualitative, real-world dynamics. For peer-reviewed scholarship in organizational behavior and human resource management, *The Devil Emails at Midnight* provides a highly nuanced glimpse of how macro-level corporate cultures manifest as micro-level toxic behaviors. Furthermore, Mallick’s work directly interacts with standard literature on "urgency culture" and the erosion of psychological safety, as popularized by Amy Edmondson. When an organization standardizes late-night communications or normalizes a state of perpetual emergency, it actively undermines psychological safety. It signals to employees that their personal boundaries, well-being, and professional autonomy are secondary to immediate corporate output. Mallick leverages her title archetype—the boss who sends emails at midnight—to symbolize this exact dynamic. This phenomenon represents a broader structural failure where poor boundaries, lack of strategic

prioritization, and systemic burnout are repackaged and praised as ‘corporate dedication’ or ‘hustle’.

From a methodological standpoint, academic reviewers might initially look at *The Devil Emails at Midnight* with a degree of skepticism due to its categorization as creative nonfiction and its reliance on personal narrative. Traditional management scholarship heavily favors quantitative methodologies—such as large-sample empirical surveys, structural equation modeling, and longitudinal statistical analyses. However, relying exclusively on quantitative metrics can easily obscure the messy, real-world human dynamics of workplace culture. Mallick’s narrative methodology fits firmly within the tradition of autoethnography and critical qualitative inquiry. By sharing personal, vulnerable accounts of her own career struggles—including moments where she recognizes her own past shortcomings as a manager—Mallick elevates the text beyond a standard, self-righteous corporate critique. Her stories act as detailed qualitative case studies, offering a rich window into the subtle psychological shifts, emotional weight, and political maneuvers that characterize toxic corporate spaces. The primary limitation of this methodological approach is its lack of statistical generalizability. Mallick’s observations are naturally shaped by her specific path through major corporate settings like consumer goods, beauty, and tech sectors. The dynamics she highlights may look different in highly unionized environments, public sector bureaucracies, or small-scale family businesses. Nevertheless, for organizational researchers, her qualitative depth provides an invaluable hypothesis-generating tool. The thirteen archetypes she defines offer a clear framework that can be easily operationalized and tested through more formal, quantitative research designs.

A common shortcoming of contemporary leadership literature is its tendency to offer vague, idealistic platitudes such as "lead with empathy" or "foster transparency" without providing concrete steps to achieve them. Mallick successfully avoids this pitfall by pairing each toxic archetype with highly actionable, practical interventions designed to disrupt bad behaviors. Her solutions focus heavily on regular calendar audits, re-evaluating meeting necessities, and clearly defining project ownership. Mallick introduces a highly effective strategy to counter micromanagement: forcing leaders to explicitly define and visualize what a successfully finished project looks like right at the start of a task. By documenting clear expectations, quality standards, and boundaries upfront, managers can safely step back. This structure gives subordinates the autonomy they need to execute their work without facing constant, arbitrary

interference. Additionally, Mallick advocates for comprehensive, ongoing calendar housecleaning. She encourages teams to actively eliminate "zombie meetings"—those recurring calendar slots that have long outlived their actual utility but persist purely out of institutional habit. By systematically freeing up calendar space, leaders can protect their time during the normal workday. This structural shift directly targets the root cause of late-night emailing, ensuring managers have the time to coach and engage with their teams during regular working hours rather than playing catch-up at midnight.

For human resource executives and corporate governance experts, Mallick's insights carry profound implications for talent retention and risk management. The modern workplace is undergoing a massive shift in how professionals view the relationship between employment and personal well-being. Toxic management is no longer just a minor human resources issue; it is a primary driver of costly employee turnover, diminished productivity, and significant institutional liability. When an organization tolerates a toxic leader simply because they hit their immediate financial targets, it operates with blind shortsightedness. The long-term costs—burnout, legal risks, recruitment expenses, and the loss of high-potential talent—routinely outweigh any short-term operational wins. Furthermore, Mallick's work makes a valuable contribution to modern DEI literature. True workplace inclusion cannot be achieved by simply implementing diverse hiring quotas or hosting annual compliance training sessions. Real inclusion is built or broken through the small, everyday interactions between managers and their teams. When an organization permits microaggressions like identity erasure, penalizes working parents, or rewards toxic positivity, it actively dismantles its own inclusion initiatives. Mallick's book demonstrates that cultivating inclusive workplaces requires a deep commitment to identifying, challenging, and dismantling toxic behaviors across all levels of leadership.

To sum up, *The Devil Emails at Midnight* by Mita Mallick stands out as a vital, transformative text in the field of modern leadership literature. By moving past superficial advice and looking directly at the systemic, environmental root causes of toxic management, Mallick delivers a clear analytical framework that is highly relevant to academic researchers and working corporate professionals alike. Her thirteen archetypes offer a practical language for diagnosing workplace dysfunction, while her actionable strategic interventions provide a clear roadmap for building healthier, more sustainable organizational cultures. While the book's qualitative and narrative-focused approach may differ from traditional statistical management research, its

depth, perspective, and grounding in real-world dynamics make it an incredibly useful addition to corporate psychology and leadership development studies. Mallick leaves readers with a powerful, unmistakable warning: if organizations want better leaders, they must stop building systems that reward and cultivate bad bosses. *The Devil Emails at Midnight* is an essential read for anyone dedicated to breaking the cycle of toxic management and designing workplaces where human beings can truly thrive.

References

Mallick, M. (2025). *The Devil Emails at Midnight: What Good Leaders Can Learn from Bad Bosses*. John Wiley & Sons Inc.