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When bad bosses happen to good employees: 8 ways to handle a bad boss



Photo: [Rachel Crews](#)

Among all of the difficult people found in the [workplace](#), bad [bosses](#) can make our lives the most miserable. Some don't give employees any feedback all year, but then give them bad performance reviews. Some simply don't [listen](#) to their colleagues. Some have a dictatorial personality that makes it impossible to work for them. Some are threatened by employees who they feel are gunning for their jobs—whether or not there is evidence to support that [fear](#). And some, although they may be brilliant in their field, just do not have the [communication](#) skills to lead a department.

No matter what causes a boss to be a bad boss, employees still have to find ways to deal with them and keep their sanity. These strategies are helpful ways, short of quitting a job, to handle a bad boss.

1. Ask for clear instruction. Bad bosses will give assignments and never tell you exactly what they want. When your crystal ball is having an off day, they'll then berate you for not being able to read their minds. It's best to have [conversations](#) with the boss up front to figure out what they expect from you when working on a project.

2. Ask for feedback. Just as bad bosses won't give you clear instruction, they also won't give you feedback. It won't be until you have a performance review that you find out that you haven't been working up to their expectations. In order to preserve your sanity, it's better to speak to your bad boss regularly about your performance so that there are no surprises.

Of course, this is not always easy, notes Saul Macias, Director of Human Resources at the [Stupski Foundation](#).

"Bad managers will always surprise you at the end of the month, quarter, or year with really bad [news](#) about your performance. So, the most proactive thing employees can do is just be very clear about what they're expected to do," he said. "But it's very difficult because when you have a bad manager, the last thing you want to do is spend more [time](#) with that manager. The natural tendency is to hide under your desk and hope that when you surface with your work product, it's what the manager wanted."

3. Give your bad boss feedback. When your boss is not adequately managing you, try turning the tables and manage them. If your boss is doing something that you want them to continue, give a little positive reinforcement. Likewise, if your bad boss does something that makes your job difficult, try your best to have a conversation about it.

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4. Be direct when you discuss your concerns. Although you may be afraid to address your concerns with your bad boss, you can try to frame the conversation in such a way that will not push their buttons and make the workday even worse.

"Look for nonconfrontational ways to get your point across," said Nancy Nelson of [HRProse, LLC](#). "For instance, if you don't have a lot of clarity around your expectations, come up with some questions and ask them in terms of what you can do to be the most helpful to the boss and how you can help that person accomplish their goals."

By doing this, Nelson said, you make the conversation about business goals, rather than making it a personal

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issue between you and your bad boss.

5. Make yourself indispensable. If bad bosses know that you are there to make life easier for them, it may go a long way toward improving the relationship.

"If you can shift priorities when there's an urgent deadline or when somebody's sick and everything's going crazy, you become indispensable to your boss," said Melody Silberstein, Senior Vice President of Human Resources at [Woodruff-Sawyer & Co](#) .

6. Document everything. Just as good managers will keep a diary of their employees' performance throughout the year so that they can reference it later, good employees with bad bosses should do the same.

"Document what your manager has said about what is expected of you," said Macias. "That way, if the manager chooses to have selective memory about what expectations were set, you can remind them of what those expectations were."

7. Don't suffer in silence. If you need extra support, don't hesitate to speak to human resources, or—if your company [culture](#) supports it—the manager at the next level (a process that is known as a skip level meeting). But proceed with caution, because you could be entering into a [political](#) minefield if you decide to handle the problem this way.

"If you are going above your manager's head, you'd better have a really good reason," said Macias. "The higher you go, the more politically challenging it can get. The risks go up the higher up you go."

8. Be proactive. You may not get the results you want when trying to deal with your bad boss problem, but doing nothing will guarantee that nothing will change.

"Sometimes people wait for the other person to take some action that will help make things better, but really as adults, we can take that action," said Christine Silver of [Silver Business Solutions](#). "So if you have a boss that you would label as a bad boss and you want to stay in that organization, do something positive about it."

This article originally appeared on my [Workplace Communication Examiner](#) page on September 22, 2009.

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