

Surviving the Bad Boss

By Kenya McCullum

If you've been in the workplace long enough, chances are at some point you have worked for a difficult boss of some kind. Over time, this person can contribute to the stress you feel and make an otherwise enjoyable job unpleasant. Although many employees tend to suffer in silence, you do not have to. By opening the lines of communication with a difficult boss, you can actually improve the relationship—as well as your job satisfaction and morale.

The clueless communicator

The most common difficult boss is the kind that has no idea that they are ineffectual. These bosses do not communicate clearly with their employees—which can result in a lot of confusion about what you should be doing, what your boss expects from you and whether or not you are even performing your duties competently. When you are working for a boss that does not communicate well, the best thing you can do is be up front about what you need to help you do your job.

“The number one most effective thing to do is talk to the boss. Most of the time, a bad boss does not realize that they're being a bad boss, so you need to tell them what you need from them,” said human resources management consultant, Susan Heathfield, who also writes the Human Resources Guide on about.com.

Although this approach is highly effective, most employees do not speak to their bosses about their concerns for fear of retaliation. Heathfield said that, although this can be a legitimate fear in some workplaces, usually an employee who approaches the boss in a diplomatic manner—without accusations or complaints—will find that they receive a positive response.

“If you approach it from a problem-solving standpoint, and if you are extremely positive and bring in specific ideas about what you need from work, I do not know any boss that will be nasty about it,” she said.

The bullying boss

Unfortunately, many difficult bosses are simply bullies that revel in their bad behavior. These bosses can make their employees miserable and create an environment of intimidation by yelling, slamming doors and verbal abuse. When you are working for this kind of boss, the best thing you can do is stand up for yourself, even though it feels uncomfortable and somewhat scary. “There are bosses that are bullies and if you do not call them on it, this is how they're going to treat you,” said Joanne Webster, the director of human resources at Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula.

In fact, Webster said that she was able to successfully change her relationship with an abusive boss by standing up to him. Although he was notorious for his verbal tirades and bad language, Webster let him know that she was unwilling to be treated that way. Her boss was so shocked that she stood up to him that he began to treat her better and, as a result, their relationship completely transformed.

Of course, like any bully in the playground, some bosses are not going to change their abusive ways no matter what you do—and in some cases, trying to stand up for yourself is only going to make the relationship worse. In that case, it is probably time for you to weigh your options and consider finding another job, whether it is in the same company or elsewhere.

It is not me, it is you

Once you've decided that there is no way to salvage your bad relationship with your bad boss and you've created an escape plan, you will need to cope with the situation while you are still there. The best way to keep your sanity intact is to not internalize the actions of your difficult boss. Keep in mind that their bad behavior is really about them, not about you, and that you did the best you could.

"First of all, you have to really embrace the fact that it is not you because many times employees start to think there's something wrong with them," said consultant Patricia Mathews, founder of Workplace Solutions. "Do what you need to do to maintain your self-esteem because that's where bosses really try to get you. If they can erode your self-esteem, ultimately that can start to impact your job performance and you do not want that."

Kenya McCullum is a freelance writer whose work can be found at www.km-com.com.