

## Dealing with a Difficult Boss

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Do you have a difficult or challenging relationship with your boss? You are not alone. Of all the less-than-perfect interactions you may have at work, this will probably be the trickiest and most stressful because of the inherent political dynamic of your relationship. Many people tend to lay the blame for this troubling type of situation squarely on their boss, citing his or her unreasonable, negative, awkward, or unhelpful behavior. Whether this analysis is justified or not, you can take comfort in the fact that, as a significant party in the relationship, you can do a great deal to remedy the “bad boss” nightmare.

### What You Need to Know

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#### **My boss frequently makes negative and derisive comments about the way I do my work. What should I do?**

Try to find a private moment when you can explain the effect this behavior has on you and why it is not helpful. Point out that this ongoing criticism affects the way you work and that you would be much more effective if he or she took a positive interest in what you do. Let your boss know that clear guidelines and constructive feedback would help you meet expectations and develop your talents. If the negativity continues, you may decide to lodge a complaint of discrimination against him or her. If you take this route, make sure you have a record of the incidents and a note of the witnesses present. And if you have a human resources department, you might also decide to consult them about this or other options.

#### **My manager has favorites and I am definitely not one of them. As a result, I often do not get essential information and I miss out on important opportunities. How can I change things?**

Lack of communication often contributes to workplace misunderstandings. One approach is to let your boss know more about what you’re doing and talk about your methods and goals. If he or she persists in denying you the information you need, you may have grounds for a charge of bullying.

## **I have a supervisor who is very moody and bad-tempered, making work almost intolerable. Is there anything I can do to alleviate this situation?**

Spend some time observing whether there is a pattern your supervisor's behavior. You may be able to influence your these moods if you understand them better. Once you've made your observations, you could try giving constructive feedback, letting your boss know how his or her personality changes affect you. Use assertive language and ask if there is anything you can do to help modify the cause of the problem. If the behavior persists, you may wish to consult your human resources department to see if there are any formal procedures in place to deal with such a situation.

## **What to Do**

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### **Think About the Impact on Your Wellbeing**

People are often tempted to live with the difficulties of having a troublesome boss rather than dealing with the problem directly. They avoid the issue by looking for ways of minimizing the impact such a challenging relationship has on their working lives. However, employing avoidance tactics or finding ways to offset the emotional damage can be time-consuming and stressful. Focusing on your own well-being will encourage you to tackle the problem rationally and try to reach an accommodation that will prevent you from jeopardizing your health or feeling that you have to leave your job.

### **Try to Understand Your Boss**

When you begin to look more closely at the difficulties you are having with your boss, the first thing to do is to think about how much of it is due to the structure of the organization—for example, your boss necessarily has to give you tasks, some of which you may not enjoy—and how much is due to truly unreasonable behavior.

Looking at the broader issues in the organization may provide the key to the problem. "Difficult boss syndrome" is rarely caused simply by a personality clash: more often than not, there are more complex organizational factors that are contributing to this seemingly unreasonable behavior.

Even though it may be the last thing you want to do, put yourself in your boss's shoes. Try to understand the objectives that define his or her role and realize the pressures they are under. Recognize your boss's strengths, preferred working style, idiosyncrasies, values, and beliefs. Observe his or her behavior and reactions, and watch where their attention is focused. This will help you to deepen your understanding and find ways of coping. Very often, when we feel disliked or when

we dislike someone, we avoid building this understanding and instead look for ways of avoiding the issues.

## **Compare the Way You Each Perceive Your Role**

As part of the process of understanding your boss, try to ascertain how he or she sees their role, and compare it to how you perceive yours, as well as the criteria used by each of you to judge your success. You may feel that you're doing your job well, but if you're putting your energy into tasks that your boss doesn't feel are relevant, you will be seen as performing poorly.

Take the initiative to explore your boss's expectations of you and agree on your objectives. This will clarify your role and give you a better idea of how to progress in the organization.

## **Make Sure You Understand Yourself**

Now that you have scrutinized your boss and developed a greater understanding of him or her, take the time to do the same thing for yourself. Sometimes a lack of self-knowledge leads to us being surprised by our reactions to other people and the feedback we get from them. Ask for input from your colleagues while you're doing this. Find out what they observe when you interact with your boss, how you come across to them, and how you could manage your communication differently. Although their perceptions may not represent the whole truth about you, they nonetheless reflect the image you create.

Reflect upon some of the past encounters you've had with your boss, perhaps with a friend or colleague who knows you well and can help you to be objective. If you become aware that this type of situation happens over and over again, it suggests that you harbor a value or belief that is being repeatedly compromised. By understanding what is going on, you can learn to manage these situations more effectively. You may also need to consider changing some of your own behavior, which is likely to prompt a reciprocal behavioral change in your boss. This may be difficult, but if you don't change anything about your style of interacting, the relationship will remain unaltered, so this is definitely worth a try.

For example, it could be that while your boss is a "big picture" person, you are more interested in details. Each time you ask for more information, you'll be inadvertently drawing attention to one of your boss's weaker points which means that he or she is likely to become uncooperative or irritated by your request. Once you've become aware of the dynamic that takes place between the two of you, it will be easier to work around both of your behavioral patterns, or to accommodate them.

## Remember That the Relationship Is Mutual

Managers need a cooperative and productive team to be able to be effective. But each member of that team in turn needs their manager to provide the resources and support they require to do their job properly. An unsupportive boss can be just as nightmarish as a vindictive one.

When managers neglect to give the people who report to them the information and feedback they need, employees are forced to second-guess what is required of them. This inevitably leads to misunderstandings on both sides. Ultimately, this will create an atmosphere of distrust, ill-will, and mutual recriminations—not to mention a very negative impact on the organization's productivity levels. Ask for the information and resources you require, and if they are not forthcoming, find other ways to get these. This will give you more control over the situation and protect you from the need to improvise.

Impossible situations can arise when employees' needs aren't met. Some people become angry and resentful of the manager's authority and stop trying; some find ways of challenging decisions in order to assert their own power; while a few will develop agendas of their own that are neither helpful nor productive.

One-sided relationships are a recipe for revolution! It is rare in business to find relationships where there is absolutely *no* reciprocal power. Once you feel that you have exhausted your resources and are no longer willing to spend time trying to manage your difficult boss, you still have the ultimate power: you can just walk away.

## What to Avoid

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### You never address the issue

Because it is not easy to confront difficult people, it is tempting to avoid biting the bullet. However, backing down will only prolong a miserable situation. Acquiescence enables bullying to thrive and allows the aggressors to hold power. By taking responsibility for your share of the problem and examining how you may be contributing to conflict between you and your boss, you are breaking the cycle. Doing nothing is not a viable option.

### You allow your boss's behavior to affect you personally

It is very easy to take the behavior of a difficult boss personally. However, it is unlikely that *you* are the actual problem. It may be something you do, it may be the values or beliefs you hold, or it may be

that you remind your boss of someone he or she doesn't get along with. The only person who loses out if you take it personally is you.

## **You don't remain detached**

Many difficult relationships deteriorate to the point where they become fraught with contempt and confrontation. This is never helpful, particularly in a work setting, and it only makes matters uncomfortable for everyone. If you find yourself being drawn into an angry exchange, catch yourself before you become too involved, try to remain emotionally detached and listen actively to what is being said to (or shouted at) you. Doing this will probably provide you with clues about why the situation has developed and may allow you to get straight to the point of concern. Take the initiative and ask for a private review afterwards to explore the incident. By discussing things openly, you may find that issues coming to the surface are relatively easy to deal with and will help to prevent further outbursts from occurring.

## **Where to Learn More**

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### **Book:**

McIntyre, Marie G. *Secrets to Winning at Office Politics: How to Achieve Your Goals and Increase Your Influence at Work*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2005.

### **Web Sites:**

HealthyPlace.com: [www.healthyplace.com](http://www.healthyplace.com)

Badbossology.com: [www.badbossology.com](http://www.badbossology.com)