

# Troubleshoot Bad Boss Behavior

By Geoffrey James

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It's an occupational hazard: Even the best bosses sometimes act like jackasses. If the bad behavior is occasional or uncharacteristic, the best bet is to just shrug it off and move on. But if your boss exhibits habitual negative behavior, it's time to take action. **Tranquilizer darts** may be a tempting option, but remember: they're unlawful and difficult to procure. Instead, we asked five seasoned executives how they've tamed bosses with behavior problems. Here's what they had to say.

## Boss Problem: Chronic Micromanagement

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**Your Solution:** Build a detailed plan for your projects, with regular milestones where you will report back for feedback. Invite your boss to review the plan and adjust it as necessary.

*"Whenever I felt I was being micromanaged, I'd go to my boss and ask what he wanted me to do—not in terms of how he wanted it to be done but in terms of what outcome he really wanted. Then I'd ask him to back off and let me do it. Over time, he saw that I could deliver what I'd promised on time and on budget, and the problem went away."*

—Bob Philips, former director of engineering at Wang Laboratories, now CEO of All-Clear Services

## Boss Problem: Vague Priorities

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**Your Solution:** Based on your best understanding, write an email that repeats what the boss said, followed by your specific interpretation of what you think she actually wants done.

*"When I was younger, I was scared to ask the boss to clarify things because I was afraid of looking stupid. Now I know that there are two questions that are never stupid: 'Why are we doing this?' and 'What is the outcome you want?' In other words, if you don't know what's expected, it's your job to get a clarification."*

—Ken Evans, former VP of sales and marketing at Waste Management, currently a management consultant at CP Strategies

## Boss Problem: Explosive Temper

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**Your Solution:** Stay calm and try to figure out what the boss is really saying. If possible, delay responding in detail until he's in a better mood.

*"If a boss yells at me—and it's certainly happened—I go into therapy mode. I tell them, 'I'm really sorry you're upset, and I want to understand exactly why you're upset.' But if the explosion includes a gross violation of my personal space, I say, 'I'll come back when you've cooled off.' And then I leave."*  
—Miriam Dumaine, former PR executive at Blanc & Otis

## Boss Problem: Absurd Expectations

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**Your Solution:** Ask the boss to help you set priorities or find ways to help you work more efficiently.

*"This is an endemic problem, especially inside high-tech firms. Whenever I had a manager who overcommitted us, I'd simply prioritize the work in the order that made sense to me and then ask him to adjust the priorities. Usually my manager would let them stand as written."*

—Bob Philips, former director of engineering at Wang Laboratories, now CEO of All-Clear Services

## Boss Problem: Belittles You in Public

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**Your Solution:** Ask for a private meeting. Indicate that you value the boss's feedback but public criticism makes it difficult for you to focus on improving your performance.

*"I've said semi-humiliating things to my employees during meetings, but only when it was necessary to the meeting—like when somebody simply won't drop a subject that it's no longer productive to discuss. From an employee's viewpoint, the best way to deal with this situation is to read the cues during the meeting and save stuff that might be controversial for a one-on-one conversation at a later date."*

—Brad Finn, president of Marlboro Corporation, a multi-million dollar shoe wholesaler

## Boss Problem: Avoids Difficult Decisions

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**Your Solution:** Proceed under the assumption that your boss intends to make what you see as the best possible decision. Then send a polite email stating what you plan to do unless you hear otherwise.

*"See if there's a way to move forward without your manager's participation. I don't always ask for permission if I'm doing something that I think is important, but I do make sure that my manager knows what I'm doing and has the option to redirect my activities."*

—Dilip Phadke, director of business development strategic initiatives at Hewlett-Packard

## Boss Problem: Demands Unreasonably Long Hours

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**Your Solution:** Weigh the benefits—and seriously consider finding a new job if there aren't any.

*"Long hours are expected in today's world. In my experience, it should be no big deal, as long as you're compensated with extra time off, additional career points, or some other perk that's meaningful to you. However, a continuous expectation of overtime without some kind of payback is just plain wrong. If that's the case, you need to consider whether you might be happier someplace where the management is more reasonable."*

— Miriam Dumaine, former PR executive at Blanc & Otis