

Building an Alliance with Your Boss

By BNET Editorial

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Does your work life seem like a *Dilbert* cartoon? Career ladders are often populated with superiors like Dilbert's, who are anything but the ideal manager. Inept, disorganized, power hungry, or downright mean—bad bosses come in all sizes and shapes. Often, they're so busy with their own careers that they're blind to the potential or goals of the people they supervise. If you find yourself feeling unappreciated, dumped on, or frustrated at work, ask yourself:

Where am I trying to go with this particular job? What is my boss' management style, and what is his or her agenda within the organization? Can I work within his or her framework without losing my mind or my integrity? If I stay at this job, what can I do to help my boss—and myself—to succeed? Or, should I look for another job?

What You Need to Know

“Difficult” or “Abusive?”

To think about all this, you must first focus on the person to whom you report. Is he or she difficult to work for, or are you facing outright abuse. Be careful in how you answer such questions: One person's “challenge” is another person's “difficulty” and yet another's “abuse.” Perhaps we should define the one term that really matters here.

Abusive behavior can range from shouting or using threatening language and obscenities to more physical manifestations. Your organization should have grievance procedures for dealing with such behavior. Quitting should be the last thing you consider. However, if you feel unsafe, don't hesitate to get free of the situation immediately and report the incident to authorities. In no circumstances is it appropriate to fight fire with fire. You don't want to exacerbate the situation, and if formal proceedings arise from the dispute, you'll want to be the one who stayed calm and legally innocent.

What if I can't afford to quit?

Sometimes perseverance can pay. Staying, for however long you wish or need to, gives you an opportunity to gain marketable skills in the process. First, however, you'll have to adopt a new attitude. You'll have to be “bigger than they are,” accepting insults, poor decisions, or slights with grace; learning how to appeal to your manager's best side and how to help him or her to succeed. If you can do that, you've learned lessons that will be valuable in any job. More importantly, you will have developed a heightened sense of self-control and personal power.

Can I win over a bad boss?

Perhaps. Along the lines of “scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours,” you need to become an asset to your manager if you expect him or her to be an ally to you. Here are a few things that might help—but they call for a certain amount of pride swallowing.

Determine out your manager’s blind spots and weaknesses, then see how your skills can help fill these gaps. Try to do this with genuine generosity and tactfulness, not letting on that you see these weaknesses. Play up your manager’s strengths and successes (again, sincerely, if possible). Building his or her credibility with others will eventually benefit you. Take on jobs that your superior finds most disagreeable. Always be sure to keep your boss informed. Managers need their employees’ help to stay on top of what’s going on in the organization.

What to Do

Put Forth a Positive Attitude

It will be difficult to win your superior’s admiration unless you can turn what you now view as a negative to a positive. Forget any ideas of retribution or “getting even.” Instead, set your sights on cooperation. Keep this in mind: Your career is the real end goal; your present job is the means to that end. Keeping your eye on your longer-term goal allows you to work at difficult short-term tasks, no matter how tedious or painful they may seem.

Learn Who Your Boss Really Is

Finding out what makes your boss tick—strengths, weaknesses, preferred style of work, and approach to problem solving—is a key to success in any job. With such knowledge, you can adapt your own style to fit. Is he aggressive or passive? Is she an innovative thinker or more conservative? Does he or she micromanage or delegate? Be a good observer and a good listener. By learning what your boss is really like, you can more easily find ways to assist and/or complement the style of your boss.

Be a Professional

Superiors depend on their employees to be helpful, resourceful, and loyal. Within reason, offer to take on additional responsibility, but don’t let it get in the way of your primary job. Try to become the

“go-to” person, the one others approach to get things done—in a quality manner and on time. If your manager is change-resistant, suggest incremental steps to make positive change happen.

When conflicts arise, try to figure out a few solutions before addressing the problem. Avoid whining or anger, especially if your boss uses his or her temper as a weapon. But neither should you feel fearful or intimidated. Learn to deal with conflict in a cool, professional manner, even if you have to excuse yourself from an overheated moment. Often, such bosses simply need to cool down, at which time you can both approach a meeting to solve the conflict. Advocate your ideas for change from a positive position of “we” rather than “me,” from a stance of “how this will help the organization” rather than “this is what I want to so!”

Focus on the (Bigger) Organization

Your boss probably has a boss to whom he or she must report. It may be that your boss is at perpetual odds with *his* boss. If you can help your boss manage upward, your assistance will be duly noted and appreciated.

Think of the Horizontal Organization

Organizations are social entities; as such, the success of each department depends somewhat on its relation to other departments. Your value to your superior, as well as to the organization, increases as you attempt to make life easier for others. You can do that with your consistent good work, good communications, and by treating other department staff as valued customers. Build a network throughout the organization, which will promote your reputation as a valued team player.

Even If You Decide to Leave...

If, despite your best efforts, things just aren't improving for you, it may be that changing your place of work is your best option. It makes little sense to endure a situation that can't change for the better. If you reach this point, don't see this as a failure—it's important to acknowledge when it's time to move on and to act on your convictions. Most times, moving on is a form of moving up. But, should this be your decision, make sure you have fulfilled your job to the fullest and not left your organizational position appearing weakened by your departure.

What to Avoid

You're Too Eager

Overachievers can sometimes be a threat to a supervisor. Eagerness is a virtue, but remember what you were hired for. No one made his boss an ally by trying to do the boss's job or by setting work priorities that conflict with those of your boss.

You Whine or Fight

Somewhere in the heart of every lousy manager is a buried suspicion of his or her own inadequacy. Being overly critical, especially to someone's face or in their presence, reinforces that insecurity. You will certainly have an opinion of your boss, but that should be kept private. You are not being helpful by criticizing your boss in public. Your superior, being the boss, will use their power to make you pay for your criticism.

Pick your fights carefully. In any fight, there is usually a certain winner—and loser. If you decide to make a stand, do so on principle, not for personal gain. Show respect for your manager's authority, even if you disagree with a decision or action. Appeal to his or her ego. Ask advice. Make suggestions that you know will help the boss see you're interested in helping to solve a problem and help the organization. When your workplace becomes a battleground, it will be hard for anyone to succeed.

You're Unprepared for Responsibility

Compared to 20 years ago, organizations today count on fewer employees to do more. Thus, as each person's responsibility is increased, managers should treat employees accordingly. In a similar fashion, employees must be able to shoulder more responsibility and be willing to provide a creditable work performance every day. So, what is crucial is that you do your work and do it well. Part of that responsibility is to know more than you need to know and to offer more than is required. To criticize the work of your boss when you aren't doing what is expected of you (and doing it well) is hypocrisy. Moreover, any sensible boss will try to keep a solid worker who consistently performs and produces results. Any boss is much more likely to become an ally when he or she *wants* to work with you to achieve mutual success.

Where to Learn More

Book:

Belding, Shaun. Dealing with the Boss from Hell. Kogan Page, 2005.

Web Sites:

Jacques Horovitz, "10 rules to manage your boss": <http://in.rediff.com/money/2005/aug/12spec.htm>

How To Deal With A Difficult Boss: www.badbossology.com

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