

HANDLING A BAD BOSS

By

Abbey Gehman (2004)

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INTRODUCTION

Information professionals are faced with unique challenges in dealing with their superiors in a special library environment. Unfortunately, working for a bad boss is one challenge that most librarians will encounter at some point in their career. A combination of factors such as personal experience, organizational environment and circumstance, influence how staff members perceive their bosses. An effective boss is one who brings about positive change [Lubans, 156] while “typical traits or behaviors of a bad boss

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include lacking clear expectations, micro-managing, undermining your decisions, lacking integrity and engaging in negative politics [Mage, 139]”. Identifying realistic expectations combined with understanding his or her motivations can reduce conflict and improve your working relationship with your boss. This chapter will examine common “bad boss” qualities and discuss strategies for “finding constructive ways to negotiate shared goals, build trust, and acknowledge differences so they can be resolved rather than ignored {Kearns, 3}.”

BAD BOSS BEHAVIORS

In her article *Bad Bosses and How to Handle Them*, Barbara Moses outlines several management styles that are commonly encountered:

- The weak manager – This manager doesn’t like to take risks or is vague with what he or she wants the employee to do. This type of manager may also be inexperienced and lack management or people skills.
- The micro-manager – This manager is involved in every detail of the employee’s job to the point where the employee has trouble doing his or her work. This boss may undermine the employee by insisting that things be done a certain way, thus not involving the employee in making decisions about their work.

- The taskmaster – This manager has expectations that may range from unrealistic to impossible; he or she tends to increase workloads, have stringent deadlines, and not believe in employees having a balance between their work and personal life.
- The nasty manager – This manager tends to embarrass employees by yelling at them or belittling them in front of their colleagues or clients. The nasty manager may have a bad temper, act unreasonably and seem oblivious to the feelings of his or her subordinates.
- The political manager – This manager knows what makes him or her look good and does everything possible to further his or her position, including using his or her employees as scapegoats. This boss may lack integrity by insisting employees do things that make him or her look good, but at the expense of the organization [Moses, 2].

UNDERSTANDING YOUR ORGANIZATION

Special librarians often face the challenge of having to justify their existence in an organization where executives have inaccurate or negative perceptions of the role of the library [Kearns, 2]. In his article, *Managing Upward*, Kevin Kearns emphasizes the

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importance understanding the organization the library serves and its strategic
environment.

Understanding the organizational culture and structure and how the boss fits within that hierarchy enables the information professional to develop expectations about what their boss can and cannot do, to justify the needs of the library, and to interact with other managers within the organization [Kearns, 5]. Understanding where the boss is coming from is key to understanding the motivations behind his or her actions and thus, being able to develop effective strategies for resolving conflicts.

UNDERSTANDING AND COPING WITH A DIFFICULT BOSS

“Bad boss” behaviors are most commonly a result of poor organization power issues or insecurity. In his article, *Managing Upward*, Kevin Kearns discusses the importance of understanding your boss’s strengths and weaknesses. “Because employees may implicitly believe that the boss’s larger paycheck demands they be experts in everything; they sometimes feel resentment when the boss may know less than they do in a certain subject or when asked to make difficult decisions and take accountability for the boss. The key is to look for ways your strengths complement your boss’s weaknesses and ways the boss’s strengths complement your weaknesses. [Kearns, 6].”

Often, when faced with a difficult boss, the natural reactions range from unhealthy confrontation, avoidance or withdrawal from the situation [Mage, 139]. The

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first step in proactively creating a better working environment is to look inward and assess yourself and the situation. Make sure you are doing your job to the best of your ability, do not complain about your boss to others in the organization, and do not get involved with work distractions such as gossip [Hansen, 1]. Separating emotions from facts is critical in improving your working conditions. Make sure you are not having an emotional reaction to your boss's actions. You may be contributing to a negative situation without realizing it.

The best way to deal with a bad boss is to first, identify the problem. What is your boss's history and current status within the organization? How much power does he or she have? Where is their career moving within the organization? Does he or she face any specific constraints or opportunities within the organization [Kearns, 5]?

If your boss is relatively new or lacks a lot of power, he or she may be insecure. Ask the boss if there are other things he or she wants you to be doing and tell him or her what you need to do your job [Ott, 6]. If your boss lacks management skills and you've made repeated attempts to work around them, take initiative, set parameters for your job, solve conflicts yourself and keep your boss abreast of critical issues [Moses, 3].

If your boss is constrained by a large workload or project deadlines, they may micromanage you or increase your workload to the point where you cannot get everything done without putting in significant overtime. Talk to your boss about his or her preferred ways of working and then give your boss confirmation that you understand

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what he or she expects of you. Report back to your boss on a regular basis with progress or problems you are encountering with your assignments. If you're overloaded, let the boss know that as well and make sure you document these communications [Ott, 1]. Find out when your boss is most receptive to being approached and find out how he or she prefers to communicate, be it email or informal meetings [How to Improve Your Relationship With the Boss]. Communication builds trust, but the way issues are presented and the timing are critical to a positive outcome.

Bosses who thrive on power may create uncomfortable situations by yelling at people, embarrassing them, or using employees as scapegoats to further their goals. The best way to respond to someone who is yelling or acting unprofessionally is to not react; let them know you heard what they've said, and go home and sleep on it. If your boss is yelling at you in front of coworkers ask him or her if you can talk about it in private. Let your boss know how a specific action makes you feel, but do it in a calm, professional manner by acknowledging what they've said and responding in slow, deliberate tones. Documenting these encounters is very important in case you have repeated experiences with your boss acting unprofessionally, unreasonably or unethically, and you have to take your complaint to your boss's boss [Ott, 3]. Talking to your boss's boss or to the human resources manager should be a last resort if the problem is an interpersonal one with your boss. However, if the behaviors involved imply hostility, aggression, sexual harassment or discrimination, taking the problem over your boss's head may need to be sooner, rather than later [Mage, 142].

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Feelings of helplessness and powerlessness are often present in those with a difficult boss. Those who voice concerns to their bosses may face potential retribution; but when employees communicate the situation as they see it, with self-control and compassion, the results can be empowering. While negative confrontation does not usually help the situation, being clear and direct often can. Approaching the boss in a straightforward, professional manner, telling him or her that you want to have a positive working relationship and asking what would be most helpful to them in that relationship, can often elicit positive results [Mage, 142].

Bosses with poor management skills are often exposed by employee turnover and chances are, you are not the only one who has had trouble working with that person. Asking colleagues or a mentor how they communicate with your boss may provide insight into your problem [Messner, 23]. However, if your working situation or if your relationship with your boss fails to improve, you may have to decide when to cut your losses. When the situation remains untenable and you are unable to change it, you have to decide what is best for job satisfaction and career growth and look into changing departments or jobs [Mage, 140].

GOOD LEADERSHIP

It's important to remember that you learn to manage by watching others in action. If you're working for a bad boss, make sure you don't perpetuate the legacy of misery

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that you've endured by adhering to these principles of good leadership, outlined in

Lubans' article, "*She Took Everything but the Blame*":

- No topic is off limits;
- No retaliation for topics introduced;
- Respectful behavior at all times;
- Zero tolerance for vilification of past or current employees;
- Confidentiality in all matters;
- Everyone has the same information;
- All share responsibility for finding and implementing solutions [Lubans, 158].

CONCLUSION

Dealing with a bad boss is never easy, but at some point most information professionals will encounter one. The information in this chapter may help you approach problems with your boss productively. Unfortunately, you may do everything correctly and still have problems with your boss. The bottom line is to try and do your job with integrity and to the best of your ability. The only person's actions that you truly control are your own.

RESOURCES

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