



HOW TO MANAGE A DIFFICULT BOSS FOR IMPROVED RESULTS

Ten tips to help you deal with a difficult boss

1. Diagnose the problem and be willing to take responsibility for your role in it.
2. Identify what motivates your boss and what matters to them.
3. Try to understand their world and its pressures.
4. Check you have aligned your goals and priorities with those of your boss.
5. Try to build a personal relationship by engaging them in conversations beyond work topics.
6. Ask directly for their advice and suggestions about how you can partner more effectively.
7. Focus on the positive and don't let this poor relationship affect the quality of your work.
8. Connect with colleagues who seem to work better with your boss. They may have some pointers and advice for you.
9. Don't give up too soon. Working for someone very different from you can teach you a lot and build your resilience.
10. But don't put up with inappropriate behaviour. Get advice and support. There's a big difference between a clash of work styles and actual unlawful behaviour!

Have you ever had a bad boss?

If you have, you aren't alone! According to the most recent Gallup 'State of the Global Workplace' study, half of all employees report that they left a job at some stage in their careers because they wanted to get away from their boss. This isn't just a deeply unpleasant experience for the individual, it's also bad news for the organisation. Research consistently shows a correlation between a positive relationship with a boss and feeling motivated to achieve organisational goals.

In our coaching work, the challenge of dealing with a difficult boss is a common issue clients want to discuss. It can even be the main reason the person wants coaching support. For most high potential and senior executives, the daily challenge is not the technical aspects of their job. They tend to be highly competent and extremely conscientious people. Instead, they often want coaching support to help them address dysfunctional dynamics with their manager. In fact, this issue can occupy as much as 40% of an executive's energy and time when things are bad. That's effort that could otherwise be spent on tackling pressing business problems, had the relationship with their boss been more collegial and productive.

In this briefing, we use the term 'boss' quite broadly. Many of you reading this will have an immediate manager who is your boss. This person conducts your performance review. But virtually all roles have a 'boss', in the sense of a person who carries some authority in relation to what you do - someone whose support and approval make a difference. This person could be the chair of the board (if you're a CEO), or a powerful individual in a relevant industry body, on a community reference group or in a regulatory authority. In other words, they may not conduct a formal performance discussion with you but they are your key stakeholder and their view of you can smooth or block your path.

What behaviours do clients attribute to a bad boss?

Typical descriptions include micromanaging, stealing credit, hoarding information, refusing to listen, criticising in public, blocking development, badmouthing to others, excluding from key meetings, punishing dissent, indulging in sarcasm and even bullying. This sounds like a grim litany but it's also true that you're lucky if you've had a bad boss at some point! While a long period under a bad boss may wear you down and affect your confidence, a short period can be like a skills boot camp, accelerating your ability to manage up in ways that will serve you well forever.

The first step is to learn about your boss and try to understand their world. Most bad bosses aren't bad people! They are reasonable people facing the classic

manager's dilemma of competing priorities, increasing demands and shrinking resources. The stresses of their role may reduce their interpersonal skills. Do you understand enough about your boss's context, including what's important to them, how they themselves are assessed and what they see as your priority contributions towards their success? The answers to these questions will help you adjust what you do and how you do it in ways that tick boxes for your boss. Remember, you can't identify how to influence someone unless you first understand what matters to them.

The more completely you can diagnose their world, the more effectively you'll partner with them. Give your micromanager boss some checklists. Show interest in your boss's priorities. If your boss likes things in writing, provide the memo. Run some private experiments to pilot doing things differently and see what works at least a little better. Over a career you'll certainly need to work well with people with many different styles.

Supposing you've tried a lot of influence strategies?

Research shows that most human beings are hardwired to cooperate and show reciprocity. But sadly a small percentage of people don't appear to operate this way. Manipulation and self-aggrandisement may motivate your manager. If you've already tried positive influence strategies, then you may need to get tougher. Invite your boss to have a cafe lunch with you. Choose a setting and time for this conversation where you can't easily be interrupted. Clearly articulate what you find difficult (and even inappropriate), as well as the benefits for both of you from working well together, such as your support for their priorities. Show you are willing to adjust in order to be a more effective partner. Offer to trial some compromises. Ask how you might improve your performance to align better with your boss's expectations.

You may need to take things further. Note instances of inappropriate behaviour. Call them out. State what your next step might be. Seek advice from others, including outside the organisation. Learn about your rights and manage your boundaries. But state your appreciation for any examples of positive behaviour.

Leverage the learning

Having had a bad boss helps you avoid this in the future! At interview stage, what can you find out about a new organisation? Do your research ahead of time. Have coffee with someone who works there. When you start a new job, prioritise learning about your boss. Put into practice your hard-won partnering skills. Avoiding a problem is generally easier than remedying one. Finally, you now know what not to do when managing others. Use your old boss's bad habits to hone your own people skills!