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How To Survive A Difficult Boss

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Difficult bosses contaminate the workplace. Some do so obviously, while others smugly manipulate their employees. The “bad boss” has become a comedic part of work culture, permeating movies and television, but when you actually work for one, there’s nothing funny about it.

Bad bosses cause irrevocable damage by hindering your performance and creating unnecessary stress. The stress they create is terrible for your health. [Multiple studies](#) have found that working for a bad boss increases your chance of having a heart attack by as much as 50%.

Even more troubling is the number of bad bosses out there. Gallup research found that 60% of government workers are miserable because of bad bosses. [In another study](#) 69% of US workers compared bosses with too much power to toddlers with too much power. The comparisons don’t stop there. Significant percentages of US workers describe their bosses as self-oriented (60%), stubborn (49%), and overly demanding (43%).

Most bosses aren’t surprised by these statistics. A DDI study found that 64% of managers admit that they need to work on their management skills. When asked where they should focus their efforts, managers overwhelmingly say, “Bringing in the numbers”; yet, they are most often fired for poor people skills.

So what do most people working for bad bosses do about it? Not much.

While 27% of people working for a bad boss quit as soon as they secure a new job and 11% quit without having secured a new job, an amazing 59% stay put. That's an alarming number of people who are living with overwhelming stress and experiencing the trickle-down effects this has on their sanity and health.

TalentSmart has conducted research with more than a million people, and we've found that 90% of top performers are skilled at managing their emotions in times of stress in order to remain calm and in control. One of their greatest gifts is the ability to neutralize difficult people—even those they report to. This is no easy task. It requires a great deal of emotional intelligence, a skill that top performers rely on.

While the best option when you have a bad boss is to seek other employment, this isn't always possible. Successful people know how to make the most of a bad situation. A bad boss doesn't deter them because they understand that success is simply the product of how well you can play the hand you've been dealt. When that "hand" is a bad boss, you can identify the type of bad boss you're working for and then use this information to neutralize your boss' behavior. What follows are the most common types of bad bosses and the strategies you can employ to neutralize them.

The Tyrant - The tyrant resorts to Machiavellian tactics and constantly makes decisions that feed his ego. His primary concern is maintaining power, and he will coerce and intimidate others to do so. The tyrant thinks of his employees as a criminal gang aboard his ship. He classifies people in his mind and treats them accordingly: High achievers who challenge his thinking are treated as mutinous. Those who support their achievements with gestures of loyalty find themselves in the position of first mate. Those who perform poorly are stuck cleaning the latrines and swabbing the decks.

How to neutralize a tyrant: A painful but effective strategy with the tyrant is to present your ideas in a way that allows him to take partial credit. The tyrant can then maintain his ego without having to shut down your idea. Always be quick to give him some credit, even though he is unlikely to reciprocate, because this will inevitably put you on his good side. Also, to survive a tyrant, you must choose your battles wisely. If you practice self-awareness and manage your emotions, you can rationally choose which battles are worth fighting and which ones you should just let go. This way, you won't find yourself on latrine duty.

The Micromanager - This is the boss who makes you feel as if you are under constant surveillance. She thought your handwriting could use improvement, so she waited until you left work at 7:00 p.m. to throw away your pencils and replace them with the .9 lead mechanical pencils that have the "proper grip." She has even handed back your 20-page report because you used a binder clip instead of a staple. The micromanager pays too much attention to small details, and her constant hovering makes employees feel discouraged, frustrated, and even uncomfortable.

How to neutralize a micromanager: Successful people appeal to micromanagers by proving themselves to be flexible, competent, and disciplined while staying in constant

communication. A micromanager is naturally drawn to the employee who produces work the way she envisions. The challenge with the micromanager is grasping the “envisioned way.” To do this, try asking specific questions about your project, check in frequently, and look for trends in the micromanager’s feedback.

Of course, this will not always work. Some micromanagers will never stop searching for something to over-analyze and micromanage. When this is the case, you must learn to derive your sense of satisfaction from within. Don’t allow your boss’ obsession with details to create feelings of inadequacy as this will only lead to further stress and underperformance. Remember, a good report without a staple is still a good report. Despite your boss’ fixation on detail, she appreciates your work; she just doesn’t know how to show it.

The Incompetent - This boss was promoted hastily or hired haphazardly and holds a position that is beyond her capabilities. Most likely, she is not completely incompetent, but she has people who report to her that have been at the company a lot longer and have information and skills that she lacks.

How to neutralize an incompetent: If you find yourself frustrated with this type of boss, it is likely because you have experience that she lacks. It is important to swallow your pride and share your experience and knowledge, without rubbing it in her face. Share the information that this boss needs to grow into her role, and you’ll become her ally and confidant.

The Inappropriate Buddy - This is the boss who’s too friendly, and not in the fun, team-building sort of way. He is constantly inviting you to hang out outside of work and engages in unnecessary office gossip. He uses his influence to make friends at the expense of his work. He chooses favorites and creates divisions among employees, who become frustrated by the imbalance in attention and respect. He can’t make tough decisions involving employees or even fire those who need to be fired (unless he doesn’t like them). His office quickly becomes *The Office*.

How to neutralize an inappropriate buddy: The most important thing to do with this type of boss is to learn to set firm boundaries. Don’t allow his position to intimidate you. By consciously and proactively establishing a boundary, you can take control of the situation. For example, you can remain friendly with your boss throughout the day but still not be afraid to say no to drinks after work. The difficult part here is maintaining consistency with your boundaries, even if your boss is persistent. By distancing yourself from his behaviors that you deem inappropriate, you will still be able to succeed and even have a healthy relationship with your boss.

It’s important you don’t put up unnecessary boundaries that stop you from being seen as friendly (ideally, a friend). Instead of trying to change the crowd-pleaser and force him to be something he’s not, having him see you as an ally will put you in a stronger position than you could have anticipated.

The Robot - In the mind of the robot, you are employee number 72 with a production yield of 84 percent and experience level 91. This boss makes decisions based on the numbers, and when he's forced to reach a conclusion without the proper data, he self-destructs. He makes little or no effort to connect with his employees, and instead, looks solely to the numbers to decide who is invaluable and who needs to go.

How to neutralize a robot: To succeed with a robot, you need to speak his language. When you have an idea, make certain you have the data to back it up. The same goes with your performance—you need to know what he values and be able to show it to him if you want to prove your worth. Once you've accomplished this, you can begin trying to nudge him out of his antisocial comfort zone. The trick is to find ways to connect with him directly, without being pushy or rude. Schedule face-to-face meetings and respond to some of his e-mails by knocking on his door. Forcing him to connect with you as a person, however so slightly, will make you more than a list of numbers and put a face to your name. Just because he's all about the numbers, it doesn't mean you can't make yourself the exception. Do so in small doses, however, because he's unlikely to respond well to the overbearing social type.

The Seagull - We've all been there—sitting in the shadow of a seagull manager who decided it was time to roll up his sleeves, swoop in, and squawk up a storm. Instead of taking the time to get the facts straight and work alongside the team to realize a viable solution, the seagull deposits steaming piles of formulaic advice and then abruptly takes off, leaving everyone else behind to clean up the mess. Seagulls interact with their employees only when there's a fire to put out. Even then, they move in and out so hastily—and put so little thought into their approach—that they make bad situations worse by frustrating and alienating those who need them the most.

How to neutralize a seagull: A group approach works best with seagulls. If you can get the entire team to sit down with him and explain that his abrupt approach to solving problems makes it extremely difficult for everyone to perform at their best, this message is likely to be heard. If the entire group bands together and provides constructive, non-threatening feedback, the seagull will more often than not find a better way to work with his team. It's easy to spot a seagull when you're on the receiving end of their airborne dumps, but the manager doing the squawking is often unaware of the negative impact of his behavior. Have the group give him a little nudge, and things are bound to change for the better.

The Visionary - Her strength lies in her ideas and innovations. However, this entrepreneurial approach becomes dangerous when a plan or solution needs to be implemented, and she can't bring herself to focus on the task at hand. When the time comes to execute her vision, she's already off onto the next idea, and you're left to figure things out on your own.

How to neutralize a visionary: To best deal with this type, reverse her train of thought. She naturally takes a broad perspective, so be quick to funnel things down into something smaller and more practical. To do so, ask a lot of specific questions that force

her to rationally approach the issue and to consider potential obstacles to executing her broad ideas. Don't refute her ideas directly, or she will feel criticized; instead, focus her attention on what it will take to realistically implement her plan. Oftentimes, your

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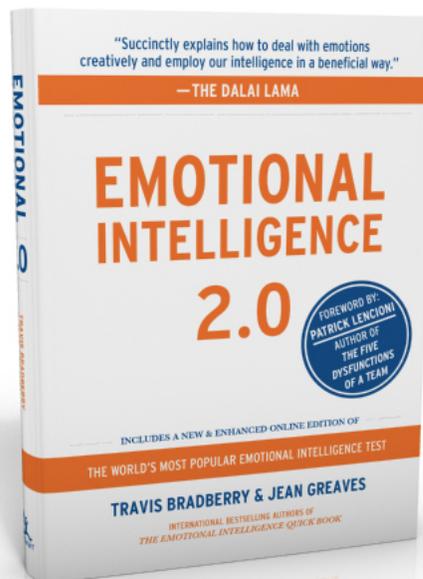
Bringing It All Together

If you think these strategies might help others, please share this article with your network. Research suggests that roughly half of them are currently working for a difficult boss!

What other advice would you give to those who are working for a difficult boss? Please share your thoughts in the comments section below, as I learn just as much from you as you do from me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Travis Bradberry is the award-winning co-author of the #1 bestselling book, *Emotional Intelligence 2.0*, and the cofounder of [TalentSmart](#), the world's leading provider of [emotional intelligence tests](#) and [training](#), serving more than 75% of Fortune 500 companies. His bestselling books have been translated into 25 languages and are available in more than 150 countries. Dr. Bradberry has written for, or been covered by, *Newsweek*, *TIME*, *BusinessWeek*, *Fortune*, *Forbes*, *Fast Company*, *Inc.*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Harvard Business Review*.



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