

## Career Management

### Dealing With Difficult Bosses

Dealing with people is not always a smooth and seamless process. When that challenging person is your boss, you must use savvy, skill and exhibit excellent timing so that you can not only survive, but also thrive in your position. Let's talk about three kinds of bosses: the slave driver, the bully, and the disorganized one.

#### The Slave Driver Boss

If you find yourself with too much work to do and your boss keeps piling more on, you will need to talk with him/her about lightening your load. Remaining silent and doing all of the work sends a message that, although difficult, the work is possible to complete. It is not until you speak up that your boss will truly understand your suffering. Keep in mind that bosses often do not know how long it takes to do specific tasks. Lightening a load that is truly too great is not the same as trying to shirk your responsibilities.

Plan your approach. You certainly do not want to be perceived as lazy, demanding or complaining. Management consultant Muriel Solomon suggests saying "I would like to call your attention to a problem we have been experiencing since the layoffs - the difficulty in getting the work done on time. Here is a list of time estimates for my present tasks. These take 140% of my regular work week, so I have to know which get priority."

To avoid the perception of being a problem creator or whiner, be prepared with a couple of alternative solutions. Ask whether your boss wants others to take over those tasks left undone; should temporary workers be hired or floating workers called upon. Additional options could include putting some of those tasks on hold for a set amount of time, or streamlining the way in which work is done. This is a decision appropriate for your boss to make. Conclude the discussion by saying: "Although you are demanding, you have always been fair. If I am going to put in a lot of extra hours, I am going to need some changes in my schedule. Can we talk about flex time or more personal days off after the crunch time has passed?"

#### The Bully Boss

Bully bosses can run the gamut from brilliant, competent and highly knowledgeable to incompetent and clueless. Being put down in front of others, being attacked for both real and perceived mistakes, yet never praised, having your projects micro-managed, or continually questioning your adequacy or competence are common bully tactics. There are reasons why people get away with this kind of behavior. Bullies flex their muscles on those who do not have direct authority over them. They rarely treat their boss in this cavalier manner. Recipients rarely complain for fear of retaliation.

Although you cannot change another person entirely, you probably can modify their behavior toward you (if not to others). You will have to discuss the situation. During this conversation, which the bully will probably interpret as a confrontation, be sure that it is conducted in private. Explain that certain behavior (being yelled at, cursed at), is not an effective way for you to be managed. Focus only on specific behavior and recent examples, i.e. "When you laughed at my recommendation at Tuesday's staff meeting in front of my team, it made it difficult for me to work with them later that day." Request that your boss give you feedback in private when you have made a mistake. Prior to your conversation, it can be helpful to talk with someone in human resources about the problem. They can

give you suggestions and maybe even role-play your conversation with your boss to give you practice and help you to be more comfortable.

## The Disorganized Boss

This person may be wonderful, a great team player, and excellent to work for. However, if his/her disorganization undermines your ability to work effectively, there are some strategies. Be clear about what your boss needs to retrieve easily and what should really fall into your area of responsibility. Ask for permission to reorganize their his/her files and papers. Make it easy for the manager to relinquish paper by demonstrating that you can easily retrieve filed papers. Explain your filing system and consider keeping a log so that others can find files easily or if they forget your explanation, can refer to the log. Rather than catching your boss on the fly, set an appointment for the conversation. Be aware of when the best timing for this discussion. Right before a meeting when the disorganized person is probably frantically trying to get all of the items together for the presentation, is not a good idea. As with other sensitive issues, focus on behavior, not personality.



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