

How to Deal with a Difficult Boss.....! A Few Suggestions to Help You Survive and Prosper

By Clay Parsons

We have all heard the horror stories. And many of us have experienced our own version. A difficult boss is an all-too-common phenomenon in the workplace. Establishing a healthy professional relationship with such a person can be a real challenge. Here are a few suggestions to keep in mind to help you survive as you struggle to establish a pleasant and productive relationship with the most important person in your workplace.

WHAT YOU SHOULD EXPECT IN A BOSS

People are complicated, definitely an understatement. Everyone has a different personality and leadership style. Simple observations can give you a good sense of how your boss operates and what she expects of you. Is she friendly and concerned with the welfare of her employees or does she keep to herself? Is she aggressive, a proactive manager, or does she limit her involvement with others? Is she a relatively happy person or does she seem angry?

You as an employee have a right to expect your boss to be competent, supportive of you and your work, and a clear communicator. You should also expect your boss to respect you and treat you well. These are bottom line requirements.

WHEN TO BE CONCERNED

If your relationship with your boss is hindering your ability to fulfill your responsibilities, then you need to sound the alarm. Such problems are NOT NORMAL and need to be addressed. Symptoms of a seriously dysfunctional relationship include being frozen out of meetings and emails, or a boss who is generally uninterested in what you are doing. Employees need communication cues. Without a means of effectively communicating, employees are powerless to know if they are doing a good job, and the uncertainty can be devastating.

DON'T BLAME YOURSELF

If there is a serious problem, please keep in mind that most likely you have nothing to do with it. Your competence, your skills, and you as an individual are NOT to blame. Many managers are just either too busy or under too much pressure to think about their communication skills. Working a 24/7 schedule does not exactly breed sensitive managers. Or, they may be interested in their work but not really interested in people. For example, do you know a software engineer who is a wiz with programming but suffers from foot in mouth disease when forced to participate in social situations? Recognizing

where someone is coming from will help you let go of the natural tendency to blame yourself for someone else's problems. It will also help you start to find a solution.

CONSULT WITH YOUR COLLEAGUES

Before you decide on a course of action, ask your colleagues about how they work with your boss and what they think of your boss's style and of him personally. This will help to insure that you are not missing something that is important. Also make sure that you don't sound like you are complaining. Keep your inquiry low-key and informal. If you hear compliments, try to find out why, if you hear complaints, ask for some specifics. If the last employee in your position had difficulty, inquire how he handled it, and what the outcome was. In other words get all the inside information you can before deciding on a strategy.

TAKE SOME TIME TO REFLECT

Take some time to reflect on the situation. Consult with a trained career or counseling professional. Try to identify any personal psychological baggage you might bring to the situation. Are you overreacting? Are you seeing it objectively? Also, do you think you can adjust to your bosses' style? The boss does not have to change but if you want to keep your job you may have to. Also, is your boss's behavior destructive or is his behavior just aggravating? If his behavior is seriously out of line you need to take action. You also need to know all of your options and the likely consequences. Some companies have been known to shoot the messenger. What are the likely ramifications to you if you file a complaint with HR, or contact a higher up to report the situation?

MEET WITH YOUR BOSS

After you have heard from everyone in a position to know, and thought very carefully about the situation, the next step is to meet with your boss and try to resolve your issues. There is no set amount of time to wait, however I believe that it should be at least several months. You need to know each other well before this direct approach will work.

On a day when there is not much going on, i.e., no deadlines or major meetings, meet informally with your boss. Make sure you have enough time. Try to focus the conversation on his needs and how you can best meet them. Be personable. Ask a few questions about his personal life or family. Ask what you can do to bring value to the organization. Ask how your working relationship with him can be improved to make his work easier. It's amazing how well bosses will respond if you take what is essentially touchy-feely language and put it in business terms. After all you are both there to advance the company's interests.

A POLITICAL OPTION - REACH OUT TO OTHERS

If your attempts at finding a solution do not bear any fruit and you feel powerless, remember that you may be able to bring about changes in your bosses' attitude and behavior with a little help from your friends. Consider personally befriending other people in the organization who hold higher positions than your boss. Don't come on too strongly but after you get to know them bring up your concerns. Don't be a complainer or

whiner, just talk about it. This strategy takes a lot of time, at least several months, because you need to get to know these people well before they will consider helping you. It does work wonders however. One of my clients tried it after several years of emotional abuse by a very cruel boss. The boss changed her behavior almost overnight! The message coming down from senior management was unmistakable and her boss, mindful of her own position in the firm, responded.

Avoid any political options that are dishonest or potentially destructive. The workplace is not a battlefield. An honest approach is effective only if you have the credibility to wield it. Besides, I am a firm believer in the old saying, what goes around comes around.

PROSPER, OR JUST SURVIVE

If, as a result of your efforts your boss has responded and you feel that you can now communicate effectively, put up with his foibles, and fulfill your responsibilities, you are home free. It may not be work heaven but it is at least workable. If, on the other hand, you now have a clear diagnosis of the problem but no solution in sight, you need to consider other options. Some workplace relationships can be fixed, some cannot. Which category does your boss fall into? Just surviving is NOT AN ACCEPTABLE job or career strategy, even if you are making lots of money. The longer you work for such an individual the more likely your psyche will suffer damage as a result. Unfortunately there are no magic answers. Test some possible solutions such as the above “political” approach, apply for a transfer within the organization, or start looking for another job.

A FEW PARTING THOUGHTS

It is hard to be a boss in the modern workplace, but that is no excuse for incompetence, or cruel behavior. Of course it is also hard to be an employee.

Careful research, consultation, planning, a little creativity and honesty can take you at least half way there. However as the old saying goes, it takes two to tango.

And if I can help let me know.

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