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Dealing with the Boss From Hell

Skills and Professional Development



Think of the worst boss you ever had.

Was she a Machiavellian Manipulator? So intoxicated by her own power that she thought nothing of you, coddling with one hand while hiding a knife in the other.

Or did you face the Political Provocateur? Twisting gossip and truth, he used information as a weapon to obfuscate his own mistakes while secretly blaming you.

Or was it the Passive-Aggressive Agitator? She ignored your efforts to improve an unproductive workplace, only to burst out in a personal attack when you predictably failed.

There are probably dozens more. Worse yet, you may have had a boss that was a psychotic madman, presenting all these traits in one horrific package: The Manipulating Provocative Agitator.

Bad bosses are a fact of life. That's because managers are human beings and human beings are imperfect creatures. The one common trait of many bad bosses, however, is an underlying lack of self-esteem. They manipulate you or treat you with anger and hostility because they are overwhelmed by their own self-doubt, either consciously or subconsciously.

These are the schoolyard bullies of your past. They're just better educated and more financially successful.

Human resource experts and behavioral psychologists have written volumes on how to control, manage, or escape bad bosses. Their list of tricks and techniques include an array of predictable methods, ranging from conversation to confrontation. You may even try to get a bad boss fired. The final recommendation, however, is always the same: If you cannot stand your boss, then quit.

But quitting isn't always realistic. And when faced with such an ultimatum, we have a way of rationalizing why our bad boss really isn't that bad.

If you are in that situation — you have a bad boss but either cannot or will not quit your job — I do have one bit of advice: Say “thank you.”

Just that. Simply tell your horrible boss “thank you” when the situation becomes stressful.

You are probably smirking at my quaint suggestion. Before turning the page, however, consider some research from the University of Southern California. In a clinical study psychologists evaluated individuals who have very low emotional security and occupy positions of high power: a stereotypical bad boss. The purpose of the study was to understand what triggered their angry outbursts or destructive behavior. Predictably, it was when someone questioned their competence. When faced with an accurate, stinging critique, these emotionally weak yet socially powerful individuals lashed out.¹

1 Fast, N.J., et al., “The destructive nature of power without status,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (2011).

There was one consistent way, however, the clinical participants could temper these tantrums: by showing gratitude. The easiest way to disarm a hostile boss is to make her feel appreciated.

Showing thankfulness is a logical way to soothe an emotionally weakened but powerful human being. It tempers the cause of the insecurity and helps a hostile manager feel less threatened. By saying “thank you” (even if you are not truly appreciative) you can manipulate the manipulator.

Expressions of gratitude do not come naturally in these situations. When you are under attack or undermined, your instinctive reaction is one of self-defense, not appreciation. Yet by acting against our instincts and showing thankfulness we defuse what could be a workplace explosion.

Gratitude, of course, does not cure a bad boss. And you certainly don't want to be the hapless enabler or gutless employee who just suffers through repeated abuse. But we've already determined that you cannot quit and cannot get your boss fired. You have to make the most of a bad situation.

I would suggest that by showing initial appreciation in tense situations you can build a relationship with a hostile supervisor. If he feels comfortable with you, he can trust you. In time, as that trust develops, you can have an honest conversation about why he feels undermined, threatened, or insecure. I don't recommend using those exact words, but you might learn the root cause of his hostility.

And then when you're the boss, watch out for overtly thankful subordinates. They just might be telling you something.

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