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Is Your Boss A Bully?

Dealing with abusive behavior from your boss.

by Dr. Beverly Langford, author of "The Etiquette Edge" and president of LMA Communication. Dr. Langford teaches management communication in the Robinson College of Business, Georgia State University.

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Remember the playground bully who made you hate recess? Unfortunately, bullies grow up and make their way into the workplace. In many companies people who love their jobs and are productive contributors dread going to work. Their medicine cabinets are full of antacids and sleep aids. Even highly skilled professionals start to doubt their abilities. If this description sounds all too familiar, you may be suffering at the hands of a bully boss.

Bully Or Demanding Manager?

What sets a bully boss apart from the manager who is simply tough and demanding – or perhaps just a grump? The big difference is that bullies make it personal.

You can recognize a bully boss by behaviors such as these:

1. Abuses you with words and nonverbal behavior
2. Humiliates you in front of others
3. Doesn't recognize boundaries, often intruding into your personal time (calls you at 2:00 a.m. when you are on vacation).
4. Makes you feel like something is wrong with you if you disagree
5. Never apologizes or admits mistakes
6. Withholds resources (time, equipment, information, and/or training) to show power or to retaliate

In the schoolyard bullies tend to pick on smaller or weaker children, often to assert control in an uncertain social environment in which they feel vulnerable. However, adult bullies in positions of authority are often already dominant and in many cases highly successful. Therefore, they are just as likely to pick on a strong subordinate as a weak one, says Dr. Gary Namie, director of the Workplace Bullying and Trauma Institute in Bellingham, Washington. Women are as likely as men to be the aggressors, but women are overwhelmingly the targets.

Unfortunately, this behavior is contagious. Studies show that a bully often spawns mini-bullies in his or her middle managers or first-line supervisors. Consequently, a bullying culture breeds throughout a department or a company. So, what do you do if you have a bully for a boss?

Avoid Becoming A Target

Every office has people whom the bully leaves alone. In almost every case they are those who, from the beginning, refused to be bullied. Stand your ground without flinching and refuse to continue the conversation until the bully settles down. During the interaction, stay calm, look the bully in the eye, deal with the issues, and avoid trying to counter personal attacks.

Don't Feed The Beast

Some people mistakenly believe that going out of your way to be cooperative, pleasant, and endearing will make the problem go away. Sam Horn, author of "Take the Bully by the Horns: Stop Unethical, Uncooperative or Unpleasant People from Running and Ruining Your Life," asserts that attempts to get along with the bully will ultimately backfire, confirming the bully's assessment of your weakness and vulnerability.

Don't Count On Help From Your Coworkers.

Says Dr. Calvin Morrill, who studies corporate culture at the University of California at Irvine: "Workers become desensitized, tacitly complicit, and don't always act rationally." They're so happy they aren't the target that they will lie low and let you take the heat.

If You Choose To Report The Bully Boss, Make Sure That You Document Incidents Thoroughly.

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If you choose to challenge the bully boss by going to Human Recourses or to the bully's manager, make sure that you carefully document the specifics of each incident, including naming witnesses, says Jay MacDonald in "[Beating a Bullying Boss](#)." Putting it in writing requires the company to follow up or be liable.

Be warned, however, that bullies are often good at managing up, so their managers may not want to hear about your problem. Further, most people know that going around your boss is risky, and often the person who reports the bad behavior comes across as a whiner or troublemaker.

You May Not Get Help — If All Else Fails, Cut Your Losses And Leave.

You may love your job, but if your discomfort outweighs the rewards, start developing an exit strategy. You don't have to quit on the spot, but commit to finding a better situation. Consider contacting a professional search firm to help you move on.

Unfortunately, in many ways, we live in a "Survivor" world. The aggressive, manipulative tough guy often seems to have the upper hand, even as companies struggle to create productive, supportive communities. Bullies aren't going away, but you can protect yourself by recognizing them and acting decisively to avoid being their victim.

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