

Telling the boss from hell (politely and tactfully) where to go

Reporting to an ogre? You don't have to suffer in silence. There are ways to take effective action without losing your job or hurting your career

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After eight months of putting up with a new manager who yelled at subordinates, pointed out their mistakes in front of other co-workers, and rejected ideas from staff because "you're not management," a support worker at a human resources company in Montreal had had enough.

So, after two vain attempts to confront her boss about her behaviour, the employee typed up a resignation letter and sent it straight to the top.

When the senior officials asked why the employee was leaving, she decided it was time to rat on the boss, whom she describes as a "completely different breed" from the mild-mannered and supportive manager she had replaced.

But the senior managers did not accept her resignation. Instead, they called on other employees to discover whether they, too, had had similar negative experiences with the new boss.

And then they had a little talk themselves with the problem manager.

"It is understood that the boss was reprimanded," the employee says. And the dressing-down had an effect.

"Shortly after, my boss confronted me and asked me not to leave - and promised to change her behaviour," the Montreal employee recalls.

She decided to stay and give her manager another chance. Today, almost half a year since that confrontation, the employee says her manager is a changed person.

"She's nurturing, supportive, and accepts that people make mistakes," says the employee, who asked for anonymity. "I couldn't wish for a better boss."

Bad bosses: They're everywhere. In a Careerbuilder.com survey last year, nearly 30 per cent of workers said they were unhappy with their supervisors. And that matters: Fifty-six per cent of workers in another survey conducted last year by staffing firm Adecco SA said their relationship with their boss has a direct effect on their work-life happiness. In a survey this year by employment site Yahoo Hot Jobs, more than 40 per cent of workers said their dislike of their manager's performance would be their No. 1 reason for taking another job.

Simon Kent, a lawyer with Kent Employment Law in Vancouver, says he's not surprised by these numbers. "I get inquiries every day from people who are getting abused or harassed by their bosses, or who think their bosses aren't treating them fairly."

But while bosses tend to have a lot of clout, workplace and conflict resolution experts say you don't have to suffer in silence. For those who have worked - or continue to work - for a difficult manager, the Montreal employee's story provides evidence that there are ways to take action effectively against a bad boss without losing your job or damaging your career.

HAVE THE TALK

Without exception, the experts say the first course of action must be a heart-to-heart with the boss, no matter how difficult that may be.

Dr. Hy Blume, a psychiatrist and consultant with workplace.calm, a Toronto firm that helps companies resolve conflicts in the workplace, says this is where the right words can come in handy.

"Don't come in to the meeting ready to make all kinds of accusations," he says. "Instead, start by saying: 'You know, I'm puzzled about something you're doing and I'm not quite sure you know how it is impacting my work performance.' "

Linda Allan, a behaviour expert in Toronto, says the right words and actions can also keep the conversation from becoming too personal.

She suggests going into the meeting with a written agenda in hand, and letting the boss know that it includes a "professional matter of a personal nature."

Taking notes is also a must, Ms. Allan adds, but should be prefaced with a few words of diplomacy so the boss doesn't feel threatened. "It's a good idea to say something like: 'I hope you don't mind - I brought pen and paper in case you have any suggestions for me,' " she suggests.

GATHER PROOF

Does the boss steal your ideas, leave nasty Post-It notes on your desk, or blame you for his or her mistakes? Workplace experts say it's important to gather proof to back up your complaints, even if you don't think you'll need it. This means keeping a copy of the brilliant idea sent to the boss - better yet, the experts say, send a copy to someone else in the office. And hang on to those nasty notes and other bits of evidence.

Keeping accurate records of negative incidents is crucial, Ms. Allan advises.

"Have a notebook or a running log where you write down the date and time and describe in detail what happened. If you have enough of these dates and times, then it shows that you have been carefully documenting the situation and that gives you more credibility," Ms. Allan says.

AVOID A SMEAR CAMPAIGN

If you do have proof of a bad manager's wrongdoing, be careful who you share it with, the experts say.

"Don't circulate it," cautions Daryl Landau, a conflict management consultant with the Toronto firm Common Ground and co-author of Conflict to Creativity. "If it's necessary, you can show this information to your boss, or to your boss's boss if you need to go higher up the chain of command."

An employee with the Public Service Commission, a federal agency in Ottawa, learned this lesson the hard way.

Lynn Nessrallah and her co-workers had been complaining for some time about their manager's work habits. One day, she took a picture of the boss asleep at his desk and e-mailed it to four other employees with a message that said: "Warning: This is what happens if you work too hard! Well, at least he made up for the time he slept by playing cards at 4:30! Pas de farce!"

The commission suspended Ms. Nessrallah for three days without pay - a penalty later reduced to one day without pay - on the grounds that her actions were a deliberate attempt to humiliate management.

"When you circulate something negative about the boss, you become the offender and attacker," Mr. Landau warns. "It's a dangerous thing to do and it can backfire on you."

FIND STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Sometimes, employers may take a worker's complaint more seriously when they know it's shared by other employees, the experts say. This can be especially effective when complaining to the boss's superiors, since they'll feel more pressure to fix the problem.

Complaining as a group can also stop employers from singling out a worker as a whiner or trouble maker, says Mr. Kent, the lawyer

"You can basically insulate yourself from reprisals by getting together with other people. But make sure you're all on the same page, because your co-workers could suddenly back down during the meeting and leave one person holding the bag."

But if you're confronting the boss instead of his or her superiors, it's best to go it alone, Dr. Blume says. "If you come in as a gang, then it will make that person defensive and disinclined to work with you."

COMPLAIN ANONYMOUSLY

There's nothing cowardly about dropping an unsigned letter of complaint into the suggestion box, Mr. Landau says.

The upside is that you'll be bringing a problem boss to management's attention.

The downside is that you probably can't give away too many details since that might reveal your identity.

"It may be more difficult for management to follow up on the complaint and get more information about the situation," Mr. Landau says. "But the benefit is that now they know there's a potential problem and they can start monitoring that particular department."

HAVE A PLAN B

Workers who complain about their bosses should have a backup plan in case things don't work out as expected, Dr. Blume says.

This could involve asking for a transfer to another department or, if that's not possible, requesting to be assigned to another supervisor.

The plan also could be to concede defeat temporarily and wait it out; sooner or later, someone in the upper ranks will notice the high rate of turnover in your department and figure out who's driving away all the employees, Dr. Blume says.

In some cases, he adds, Plan B may call for you to walk away from your job. "If you are going to cross swords with your boss, be prepared for the possibility that one of you may have to go."

But, as the Montreal employee found out, a letter of resignation may be the wakeup call that forces the employer finally to do something about the bad boss who's making everyone's lives so miserable.

"For me, the most amazing part of my story is that it worked out," the employee says. "Other employees have thanked me for standing up and I wouldn't be surprised if the boss is happier too."

OGRES ARE PEOPLE, TOO

What's the issue here?

Do a bit of self-analysis to figure out what sets off your bad behaviour. Do tight deadlines transform you from civil manager to raging bull? Does a particular slow-talking employee stretch your patience to its limits? "Carefully examine your hot buttons and work to reduce them," Ms. O'Connor says. "Being self-aware really is the first step to changing your behaviour."

Make a fresh start

Nothing says "new beginning" better than a shiny new project that will allow you to signal your good intentions, Ms. O'Connor says. "Make a fresh start by creating opportunities for people to contribute and by giving people assignments that they can later present to management. When you trust your team, your team will really work hard to bring the results you need."

Win over the influencers

Every team has people whose opinions tend to sway the group, Ms. O'Connor says. "Connect with these influential people and find out from them what's going on. If you succeed in winning their respect, it's quite likely that they'll persuade others to see you from their perspective."

Atone

If the situation calls for a public apology, do it, Ms. O'Connor says - but be sure you genuinely feel contrite. "Otherwise, people will know it's a forced apology." And since you are a manager representing the company, it's a good idea to discuss the apology first with senior company officials, she adds.

Get into team-building

Take your employees out for lunch, schedule regular brainstorming sessions or suggest that you all train for that coming charity run. Bad bosses tend to create splintered departments, says Ms. O'Connor, so it's important to mend fences and start building some team spirit.

Get help if you need it

Your short temper or bullying behaviour may be caused by deeply rooted problems that call for professional help, Ms. O'Connor says. She suggests seeking out the services of a psychotherapist, an anger

management counsellor, or an executive coach. "If you have an employee assistance program as part of your benefits package, you should use it to get the help you need," she says.

Give it time

Don't expect to be an overnight success: While you may be able to go into work the next day with a new attitude and impeccable behaviour, don't think you can immediately change your subordinates' opinions of you, Ms. O'Connor says. "It will take a while to change that negative image and win the respect of people," she says. "So be patient with your team and with yourself, because this is not something you can fix in a week."

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