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Do You Hate Your Boss?

How to deal with it

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SAM CHIVERS

Managing Yourself
Do You Hate Your Boss?

How to deal with it *by Manfred F.R. Kets de Vries*

Stacey really loved her job at a top tech company—that is, until her boss left for another firm. The new manager, Peter, seemed to dislike pretty much everyone on the team he had inherited, regardless of individual or collective performance. He was aloof, prone to micromanaging, and apt to write off any project that wasn't his brainchild. Within a year he had replaced a number of Stacey's colleagues.

At first Stacey (whose name, like others in this article, has been changed to protect her confidentiality) tried to win her new boss's trust and respect by asking for his feedback and guidance. But Peter was unresponsive. Despite her best efforts, Stacey couldn't make the relationship click. When, several months in, she finally decided to approach HR about the problem, she got nothing more than sympathy. The firm was not willing to sanction Peter, because his unit's performance had not materially deteriorated and no one else had lodged a complaint.

Unable to escape or change the dynamic with Peter, Stacey felt stressed, depressed, and increasingly unable to do good work. She worried that the only way out was to leave the company she loved.

Stacey's situation is not uncommon. According to the most recent Gallup "State of the Global Workplace" study, half of all employees in the United States have quit jobs at some point in their careers in order to get away from their bosses. The figures are similar or even higher for workers in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.

The same survey, consistent with previous ones, also shows a clear correlation between an employee's engagement (that is, motivation and effort to achieve organizational

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goals) and his or her relationship with the boss. While 77% of employees who said they were engaged at work described interactions with their managers in positive terms (for example, "my supervisor focuses on my strengths"), only 23% of those who were "not engaged" and a mere 4% of the "actively disengaged" did the same. This is worrying because research has shown that an engaged workforce is a key driver of organizational success, and yet according to Gallup, only 13% of employees worldwide fall into that category.

What are the "bad" bosses doing? Frequently cited grievances include micromanaging, bullying, avoiding conflict, ducking decisions, stealing credit, shifting blame, hoarding information, failing to listen, setting a poor example, slacking, and not developing staff. Such dysfunctional behavior would make anyone unhappy and unproductive. However, whatever sins your boss commits, managing your relationship with him or her is a critical part of your job. Doing it well is a key indicator of how effective you are.

In my work as a researcher, management coach, and psychoanalyst, I have spent many decades working with senior and high-potential executives to help them resolve dysfunctional dynamics with their managers. This article explores the options available to anyone in the same predicament. Much of it will feel like common sense. But I have found that people often forget that it's in their power to improve bad situations, so having the options systematically laid out can be very helpful.

Practice Empathy

The first step is to consider the external pressures your manager is under. Remember, most bad bosses are not inherently bad people; they're good people with weaknesses that can be exacerbated by the pressure to lead and deliver results. So it's important to consider not just how they act but why they're acting that way.

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Research has shown time and again that practicing empathy can be a game changer in difficult boss-subordinate relationships, and not just as a top-down phenomenon. Experts such as Stephen Covey and Daniel Goleman emphasize the importance of using this key aspect of emotional intelligence to manage up. Neuroscience also suggests that it's an effective strategy, since mirror neurons in the human brain naturally prompt people to reciprocate behaviors. Bottom line: If you work on empathizing with your boss, chances are he or she will start empathizing with you, which will benefit everyone.

It may seem difficult to feel for a manager who isn't giving you what you need or whom you actively dislike. But as Goleman showed years ago, empathy can be learned. And recent research from other scholars, including experts at the Menninger Clinic, suggests that if you practice empathy consciously, your perceptions of others' feelings will be more accurate.

I recall the case of George, a sales manager in a big U.S. firm, who had been going out of his way to please his boss, Abby—to no avail. George was extremely frustrated by Abby's lack of attention and support until a colleague told him to imagine being in the boss's shoes. George knew that Abby's own manager was a real taskmaster, famous for setting impossible stretch goals. Once George took that into account, he realized that Abby was not deliberately ignoring him; she simply didn't have time to be supportive, as she was working on several important new business initiatives at once.

Although it may be a conscious exercise, a display of empathy is still best delivered in an informal setting. You don't make an appointment; instead you look for the right moment when the other person will be receptive to your efforts. In George's case it came on a shared business trip to some high-profile accounts in Singapore. Over dinner the first day, he carefully offered Abby an opportunity to open up about the pressures she felt by asking how the new business projects in mainland China were coming along.

Abby turned out to be only too ready to share her stresses and frustrations, and the exchange marked a turning point in what eventually became a very satisfactory working relationship between the two. George worried less about the attention he was (or wasn't) getting, and Abby seemed readier to listen to his problems.

Consider Your Role

The second step is to look at yourself. In my experience, people who struggle to work well with their bosses are nearly always part of the problem themselves: Their behavior is in some way preventing them from being recognized and valued. This probably isn't what you want to hear, but by acknowledging that you might be doing something wrong,

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figuring out what it is, and adjusting accordingly, you might be able to salvage the relationship.

Start with some introspection. Consider, as objectively as you can, any criticisms your boss has offered. In what areas do you need to improve? What aspects of your behavior or output might irk him or her?

Also ask yourself what might make your personalities clash. I often find after a fairly short discussion with clients that their managers are "transferential figures," representing authority figures from the past with whom the clients have unresolved issues. Transference of this kind has a powerful influence on behavior and should always be explicitly considered in figuring out dysfunctions in any boss-subordinate relationship.

One client, for example, told me that her boss reminded her of a primary school teacher who had bullied her and whom she had never been able to please. The two resembled each other physically and shared a similar peremptory manner of communicating.

When we surface transference, people can usually take steps to correct for it. After our sessions, my client reported that she found it easier to step back and separate her past resentments from her present reactions and view her boss's comments in a positive light.

Next, observe and seek advice from colleagues who work successfully with your boss. Try to understand his or her preferences, quirks, and hot buttons, and get some pointers on how you might do things differently. When you approach colleagues, though, make sure to frame any questions carefully. For instance, instead of asking a coworker why the boss always interrupts you when you speak, ask the person "How do *you* know whether to speak up or not? How can you tell when the boss does or doesn't want input? How do you express disagreement?"

Also take advantage of group training programs to get advice from peers. I remember the case of Tom, who, during a leadership development workshop, was asked (like everyone else in his small group) to present an issue that was troubling him. He confessed that he needed to improve his relationship with his boss; whatever he did, it never seemed good enough. His peers were frank in their responses. They said that he often sounded muddled in meetings when trying to explain his business unit goals and that he seemed to be doing a poor job of empowering his direct reports. In the view of his colleagues, this was why the boss was dissatisfied with Tom's performance.

They suggested he spend more time rehearsing and framing his presentations and, in particular, work on proposing less generic goals and identifying measures of success. They also recommended that he have his subordinates copresent with him and make reports on their own. Tom asked a few clarifying questions and left the workshop eager to apply the advice he'd received. At the next year's planning session, his boss congratulated him on the quality of his group's presentation and followed up with an e-mail praising the teamwork his unit was starting to display.

> Mutiny and whistle-blowing can damage your future job prospects. Lodging a formal complaint, therefore, is definitely a last resort.

If feedback from your colleagues doesn't provide any insights into how your behavior might be hurting you, the next step is to try talking to your boss about the problem. Again, approach the conversation delicately, framing your questions in a positive way: "How can I better help you achieve your goals?" rather than "What am I doing wrong?" Position yourself as seeking advice or even mentoring. Request a one-on-one meeting to do this, and give your boss an idea of what you'd like to discuss: performance issues and the development of your management skills.

If you're lucky, he or she will appreciate your willingness to engage and will point out areas to improve, building the foundation for a closer relationship. If your boss stonewalls or rebuffs you, however, that's a clue that the problem isn't you, and you need to figure out what—if anything—you can do to alter things.

Offer a Chance to Change

If you conclude you're not the one derailing the relationship with your boss, only then should you openly suggest that the two of you don't seem to interact well and that you'd like to remedy the situation.

There are a number of ways into this conversation. If you have the opportunity, you can tack it on as an extension of a frank discussion you're already having. Jeanne, a French executive I once taught, told me about a visit she'd made with her British boss, Richard, to meet a customer. The client gave them both an extremely rough ride, which prompted an exchange between the two of them about what had gone wrong. This gave Jeanne an opening to express some of her frustrations

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with her boss's behavior, and the two were able to work out how they could improve their own relationship.

If a moment like this does not present itself, you have to initiate the conversation yourself. Most conflict management experts recommend doing that in a private setting where you can't easily be interrupted and where it will be difficult for either of you to leave. To have a constructive talk, it's important that people feel they are in a "safe place." Invite your boss out to lunch, perhaps, at a restaurant where you are unlikely to meet colleagues. Explain that you have some private concerns you want to discuss away from the office. If a specific business problem, such as the failure to meet a crucial deadline, came about because of the friction between you, you can say you wish to talk about this event and its implications for other projects—the kind of postmortem that Jeanne and Richard had. Let your boss know to expect a difficult conversation—one that can't be sidestepped. If you just say you want to discuss interpersonal issues, the boss may find some crisis that takes priority.

When you begin a dialogue, you may even discover that your boss is not consciously aware of the degree of your discontent. With Jeanne, for example, one problem was that Richard never asked her for an opinion, listening only to colleagues (also largely British and male) who volunteered their ideas. When they talked about it, Richard explained that he didn't want to put her on the spot in meetings but he had no intention of silencing her.

Organize a Mutiny

If you can't improve things by changing your behavior or opening lines of communication with your boss, and if your colleagues feel the same way you do, you should consider alerting HR and the boss's bosses to the problem.

In taking this route, however, you need to make a substantial business case for why your boss is a liability—someone whose poor management will ultimately cause the team's, unit's, or organization's performance to suffer. You must also be prepared to make a credible threat of litigation against the corporation. You'll need documented evidence of the boss's negative impact and inappropriate behavior, such as witness statements and examples of correspondence that clearly breach company rules or HR guidelines. The more people willing to go on record with similar complaints and evidence, the harder it will be for senior managers to ignore or deny the problem.

In the absence of compelling data indicating a pattern of bad behavior, HR representatives are unlikely to be allies; very often they will take the boss's side. Maria, another executive I counseled who had had issues with her boss, initially went to HR for help. But her boss was extremely skilled at self-promotion and persuaded HR that in fact Maria was the problem. The head of HR not only declined to pursue the matter but even suggested that it was up to Maria to adapt to her boss.

Stories like that are all too common, and many subordinates who have not prepared a strong case against the boss have ended up losing their jobs rather than forcing a change of behavior or practice. Mutiny and whistle-blowing can also damage your future job prospects. Lodging a formal complaint, therefore, is definitely a last resort.

Play for Time or Move On

If you are unable to change your relationship with your boss by taking the steps described, and if there isn't potential for group action, then your options become more limited.

In these situations, most employees simply go through the motions at work and minimize contact with the boss. There is always the possibility, or hope, that he or she will move on. But remember that in playing for time, you also need to set a time limit, so that hanging in doesn't become a way of life. If it does, you will feel disengaged, disenchanted, and even embittered. And that may spill over to other realms, contributing to depression and a range of additional psychosomatic reactions.

The better solution is to look for another job while you're still employed, exiting on your own terms. Beef up your résumé, contact headhunters, line up references, and start interviewing. Having a bad boss isn't your fault, but staying with one is.

That's ultimately what Stacey concluded. After some soul-searching, she started to hunt for another job. It didn't take her long to find an interesting position in another organization working under a boss with whom she had great rapport. Some months later a former colleague told Stacey that Peter had left the company soon after her. Although his departure was announced as his own choice, the inside scoop was that top management had forced him out because he was losing too many valuable people.

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FURTHER READING

For more about employee-boss relations, see the following:

HBR Guide to Managing Up and Across
Harvard Business Review Press, 2013

"Managing Your Boss"
John J. Gabarro and John P. Kotter
HBR, January 2005

"Why People Follow the Leader: The Power of Transference"
Michael Maccoby
HBR, September 2004

"What to Do When You and Your Boss Aren't Getting Along"
Rebecca Knight
HBR.org
August 18, 2016

"How to Work with Someone You Hate"
Amy Gallo
HBR.org
January 30, 2012

"Managing 3 Types of Bad Bosses"
Vineet Nayar
HBR.org
December 1, 2014

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