

**Managing Up**

# **What to Do When You Have a Bad Boss**

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**Summary.** Despite the \$15 billion companies spend annually on managerial and leadership development, bad bosses are common in the American workforce. So why do employees end up working longer (two years, on average) for toxic bosses than nontoxic bosses? Quitting can be hard for a number of psychological reasons. But it's not the only option for employees struggling with bad bosses. Before deciding to quit, employees should try a number of strategies to ameliorate their tough situations. Having direct conversations with their bosses, engaging with their support networks, making lifestyle changes outside of work, and exploring other opportunities within their current organizations are good places to start. It is,

however, possible that quitting *is* the best option — and that's okay. Doing so gracefully and strategically will help employees transition from bad situations to better ones. [close](#)

Despite the \$15 billion companies spend annually on managerial and leadership development, bad bosses are common in the American workforce. A study by Life Meets Work found that 56% of American workers claim their boss is mildly or highly toxic. A study by the American Psychological Association found that 75% of Americans say their “boss is the most stressful part of their workday.”

And a recent study by Gallup found that one in two employees have left a job “to get away from their manager at some point in their career.”

Surprisingly, though, another study found that employees end up working longer (two years, on average) for toxic bosses than nontoxic bosses. Why?

### **Quitting is hard**

People stay in jobs with bosses they don't like for a multitude of reasons. Some of the most common reasons I've heard during my 20 years of organizational consulting and coaching include:

- I don't have the energy to look for a new job.
- I really like my job/colleagues/commute.
- I need the salary. I can't afford to take a pay cut.
- There aren't any other jobs that would be better.
- I don't want to lose the benefits.
- I've invested too much to start over in a new organization.
- This job pays too well to leave.
- I don't have the skills to get a different job.
- Things might get better.

Many of the above excuses come down to basic human psychological dynamics. People enduring high-stress situations often suffer from emotional exhaustion, robbing them of the energy needed to search for a new situation. It's hard to quit without another opportunity lined up, and it's hard to line up another opportunity when one feels depleted. Emotional exhaustion also strips people of the ability to envision a more positive experience — and hopelessness ensues.

Loss aversion is another psychological process that makes it hard to give up something you have. We tend to strive to keep what we've worked hard to obtain. In the workplace this could be salary, status, stability, seniority, social connections, and all the other benefits we've accumulated over the years.

Additionally, research tells us that people stay in toxic situations when they are engaged in “high meaning” work. In other words, when people are emotionally attached and engaged in their job, they stay, even when they work for bosses who treat them poorly.

Last, we might also hope that a mean boss will change his or her ways, that the organization will take some action, and that things will improve.

Although staying put may seem more secure than leaving, it actually comes with many risks. A study of 3,122 Swedish male employees found that those who work for toxic bosses were 60% more likely to suffer a heart attack, stroke, or other life-threatening cardiac condition. Other studies in American workplaces show that people with toxic bosses are more susceptible to chronic stress, depression, and anxiety, all of which increase the risk of a lowered immune system, colds, strokes, and even heart attacks. Some studies show that it may take up to 22 months to recover physically *and* emotionally from a toxic boss. While the idea of quitting may seem scary, the reality of staying in a job with a toxic boss can be even scarier.

## **How to manage**

Bad bosses should be taken seriously. If quitting is not an immediate option, there are some practical things you can do to mitigate the potential damage of working for a toxic boss. While specific strategies depend on the kind of boss you have, e.g. bullies, narcissists, etc., there are some general approaches that can help you manage the situation.

**Forget giving feedback. Make requests instead.** It's usually a good idea to try to talk to your boss and see what's going on. But chances are a difficult boss may not be open to hearing feedback about his or her failings. So try making specific requests to get what you need. Be specific about the resources and support you need to do your job, explain your rationale, and articulate how this will benefit them and the organization. Think about timing, and try to have these conversations when your boss is calm and in an upbeat mood. Make sure to prepare, practice, and anticipate reactions.

**Engage with your support network.** A strong support network is critical when dealing with an emotionally challenging situation. Surround yourself with friends and people who support and encourage you. Have outlets outside work for socializing and reducing stress. Talk to a coach, therapist, or other trained professional.

**Get plenty of exercise and sleep.** Taking care of your physical and mental well-being is essential. If feasible, take a temporary break from work. Find activities outside of work that bring you joy and satisfaction. Consider mindfulness and relaxation practices such as yoga and meditation. Practice positive self-talk by reminding yourself that you are not the problem. Remember, you can't control how your boss behaves, but you can control how you respond to their behavior.

**Explore other opportunities within your organization.** There might be ways to escape your toxic boss without having to leave your company. Look into other positions in the company that interest you, meet with colleagues and managers in other departments, think about where your skills might translate, and make a case for your transition.

**Consider consulting with HR.** Research your HR department's reputation in supporting employee complaints before you approach. Let them know about the issues you're having with your boss and what you've done to try to rectify the situation. They may have already helped others in the exact same situation and could offer solutions you hadn't thought of.

### **Know when to go**

Of course, be ready to accept that quitting could be the best solution. There are some unequivocal signs that it's time to move on to the next job. If you dread going to work every day, if you feel physically or mentally unsafe at work, if you spend more time thinking about your boss than your work, if stress from work permeates the rest of your life, if your self-esteem has plummeted, it's time to go. You must give yourself permission to make a career change — to let go of hope that things will get better, and to overcome the fear of quitting.

Once you make the decision to quit, it's important to do it as professionally and gracefully as possible. While it might be tempting to go out in a blaze of anger and curse words, this rarely works out well in the long run. Don't burn bridges. Here are a few tips:

**Line up your next move.** There is no magic bullet here: you just need start the job search.

**Give proper notice:** The standard for most industries is two weeks. Giving more time is always an option but try not to give less if you can help it. Write a proper resignation letter and tell your supervisor — in person — that you are leaving. Don't forget, letters of resignation often end up in employee files and might be used if your former boss is ever called for a reference. Make sure your letter is professional.

**Create a transition timeline.** Clearly articulate your plans for transition. Be clear about what you are going to do before you leave and stick to it. If you promise to finish projects, then finish them.

Don't bite off more than you can chew, but don't leave things on the plate that you promised to take care of. Leave your boss and your team fully updated on the status of all your projects, etc.

**Be prepared to go early.** If your boss is truly toxic, he or she could dismiss you the minute you give notice. Make sure you have your personal belongings, contact information, important papers, commendations, etc. organized *before* you give notice. Be sure to return all company property promptly and properly. Get proper documentation stating that you've returned it. The last thing you want is someone claiming you've stolen anything.

**Do not bad mouth.** Resist the urge to bad mouth your boss during potential job interviews or even after you land a new job. Hiring managers don't know you and they don't know your boss — all they will see is a complaining malcontent.

Remember, it's okay to quit. Your personal and professional future may depend on it.

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