
Managing a Bad Boss

by Lynne Eisaguirre

“I have a bad boss”, is a frequent client complaint. A recent one came from Tom, who complained that he had only one good boss in his 15 year career, and that his wife, Karen, had three bad bosses out of five. “This makes no sense,” he declared, “Karen only wants to make her boss look good. Why would they treat her badly?”

Can you find the error in Tom’s thinking?

Good Bosses Are Rare

It is that most bosses *should* be good ones, and if you’re unlucky enough to be caught with a bad one, it’s unusual and unfair.

Yes, of course, in an ideal world you should have bosses who are excellent communicators, managers and motivators but we live on planet earth here. Your boss is your boss for one important reason: *someone above them thinks that they should be the boss!* They may have lied, slept or bribed their way to the top but complaining about your plight will get you nowhere.

There Are No Bad Bosses

The reality is that so-called *good* bosses are the exception, not the rule.

My response to these complaints is always the same: *There are no bad bosses, only bosses that you're not managing well.*

This isn't to say that you should ever put up with an abusive, harassing or otherwise illegally acting boss, but you need to understand that managing your boss well is an essential workplace skill, one that you will, unfortunately, be required to activate throughout your career.

Extreme Bad Bosses

Think *your* boss is bad? Consider the character of Miranda Priestly in the bestselling book and movie, *The Devil Wears Prada*. Miranda Priestly, editor of *Runway Magazine* and grand dame of fashion journalism, devours her assistants like a lion carelessly crunching on baby rabbits. Her latest victim, Andy, has the job millions of girls would kill for – or so she's told time and time again. Miranda treats Andy as yet another fashion accessory: necessary, but clearly her possession. The entire staff walks around on pins and needles trying to accommodate Miranda's insane demands. Not only does she expect her assistants to jump when she asks, but they also must ask "How high?"

A Paycheck or a Down payment on Your Soul?

Miranda's a textbook example of the type of bad boss I call the DI (Devil Incarnate). Yet, all bosses who careen through the workplace like problem children seem to recite the same mantra when they attempt to corral the troops: "You don't

have to like me but you do have to respect me.” The worker bees, already cranky and frothing at the mouth from dealing with this clueless prig, respond silently, or among themselves, with furious indignation.

Who is right here? As usual, no one is totally correct. One of life’s painful truths is this: you have to give up certain things in exchange for a paycheck. One of those things is the right to collect a paycheck and disrespect your organization or your boss at the same time. If you don’t respect them, you have three choices:

- 1) Leave.
- 2) Diplomatically push back (i.e., try to change them or appeal to a higher authority to get rid of them).
- 3) Adjust your own attitude.

Sorry, but staying around and whining is not an acceptable option. Why? For one very pragmatic reason: it does not work. It will make you miserable and eventually it will boomerang back to the boss.

Your Boss *Will* Know

One of my favorite quotes is from Emerson who said: “who you are speaks so loudly, I can’t hear a word you’re saying.” Unless you’re Robert DeNiro or Meryl Streep, you’re not going to be able to pull off the illusion that you respect someone when you don’t. At some level, they’re going to know it and react. Then it will just become a downward spiral that sucks your job and your mental health

into the sewer. Is respect earned? Sometimes, but better to respect everyone than to whine ineffectively.

Perhaps you can take solace from the reality that bum bosses are in ample supply. Thanks to the web, their victims no longer have to suffer in silence: they share loudly and long about their nemeses. Check out Working America's My Bad Boss Contest. The group, affiliated with the AFL-CIO, is collecting anonymous workplace scary stories at its Web site, www.workingamerica.org/badboss. Forced overtime, canceled vacations, and reprimands for taking needed sick leave are just the beginning of some bosses' insensitivities.

Need more tips for working with Bad Bosses? Order my new book *Stop Pissing Me off: What to do When the People You Work with Drive You Crazy*.