
How to Handle a Toxic Boss



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People don't leave bad jobs, they leave bad managers.

Naomi was troubled by recurrent nightmares. Each night, she found herself trapped in a dark parking lot with no exit, hiding from approaching footsteps. As a shadowy figure with a familiar face loomed closer, Naomi tried to run but her feet felt like lead. She'd wake up, drenched in sweat.

Through therapy and coaching, Naomi connected the dots between the subject of her nightmares and her overbearing boss. She realised that the constant anxiety she felt going into work stemmed directly from his demanding behaviour. Ironically, while her boss pushed for increased performance, his methods undermined her confidence and hindered her ability to deliver.

Workplace stress due to [bad bosses](#) is more common than most people realise. Dealing with bosses who behave inappropriately, set unrealistic expectations or are unsupportive of work-life balance unsurprisingly leads to negative health outcomes.

Toxic work environments have been [linked to high levels of anxiety](#), [depression](#), [poor sleep](#), [high blood pressure](#) and even [premature](#)

aging. High levels of work stress may result in unhealthy behaviours and habits, and spill over into personal lives, affecting the well-being of partners and children.

Bad bosses exist in all shapes and sizes, spanning from narcissists and bullies to micromanagers. Among them are those with extreme mood swings and unreasonable expectations, as well as those who hoard information, avoid conflict, never give positive feedback or are perpetually unavailable. These traits make them very difficult to work for.

Especially harmful are bosses who have both psychopathic and narcissistic traits. Driven by this "dark dyad", they are often quite Machiavellian. They tend to exploit those they manage, take credit for their subordinates' work, be overly critical and generally behave inappropriately. In addition to being a nightmare for individuals, bad bosses can significantly harm the overall work climate. Their demands and behaviours drain employees' willpower and motivation, contribute to mental fatigue and impair performance.

Furthermore, when such bosses pit their subordinates against each other, a culture of constructive competitiveness can turn into one of mistrust and backstabbing. The impact is severe: Employees may miss many work days due to mental health issues, and others may quit their jobs just to escape their boss.

Five ways to deal with a toxic boss

If your manager is calling you at all hours or expects you to cancel your holiday plans, it's time to reset expectations with your boss or HR, or consider other job options. Here are several strategies you can pursue when dealing with toxic bosses.

1. Establish boundaries and understand your boss' pressures

One of the first and most important steps is to set clear boundaries and explain what you are and are not prepared to do. Setting boundaries involves the delicate art of saying "no" when faced with unrealistic expectations. One approach is to discuss your current workload with your boss and have a serious conversation about realistic benchmarks and timeframes.

While you open this discussion, take the opportunity to explore the pressures your boss is under. Understanding your boss' situation may help you align expectations and find win-win solutions. By doing so, you might discover that

your boss is not as difficult as you initially thought.

2. Provide upward feedback on leadership style

If setting boundaries does not work and you still feel extremely pressured, it may be time to address the elephant in the room: your boss' leadership style. However, expressing your frustrations can be a delicate conversation. Challenging a bad boss may also mean challenging the people who put them in that position and asking them to address the dysfunctional behaviour – something they might be reluctant to do.

Therefore, if you decide to have this discussion, consider seeking help from HR and asking them to be part of the conversation. To enlist their support, build a case on how your boss' behaviour affects your mental health and that of others in the organisation, ultimately affecting overall performance. Collect and share detailed records you have kept about your boss' dysfunctional behaviour with HR. When having this discussion, highlight the problems but also offer concrete and constructive suggestions to improve the situation.

3. Transfer out of your position with grace

If your boss cannot or is unwilling to change, but you enjoy working for your current company, another option is to explore opportunities within the organisation. You could consider making a lateral move, although this would require extensive networking. Begin by subtly indicating to other senior executives that you are open to being approached for new opportunities and that you are seeking responsibilities beyond your current workstream.

However, as you engage in **networking activities**, refrain from speaking negatively about your boss or engaging in gossip. Going to war with them is not a good idea; it is better to focus on highlighting your own strengths and accomplishments.

4. Quit and scout out a better boss

If your work situation continues to negatively impact your health, self-esteem and well-being, and if there is no opportunity for a transfer or improvement, it may be time to leave your current employer. Instead of holding on to hope for a change in your relationship with your toxic boss, focus on finding a work environment where your talents are appreciated.

By broadening your external network and gaining a fresh perspective on potential career options, you may discover that competitors in your industry are seeking the skills and expertise you possess. However, ensure that you conduct thorough due diligence to avoid finding yourself in a similar situation with another bad boss. You wouldn't want a repeat of the same experience.

5. Reach out for help and reassess your options

Taking care of your mental health is one of the most important factors for living a fulfilled life. Nobody is an island, everybody needs support networks. Therefore, if you find yourself stressed due to a poor work relationship, it may be time to seek out a **coach**, mentor or other trained professional who can assist you in reassessing your options. These individuals can help direct you towards more rewarding career opportunities.

Naomi realised that the best course of action for her was to move on. She hoped to view her experience as a valuable learning opportunity. Ironically, working under a bad boss had some positive aspects – it sharpened her management skills and taught her how to avoid becoming a bad boss herself.

Given that people spend a considerable portion of their lives at work, working environments should not jeopardise mental or physical health. When individuals are mentally healthy, they can perform at their full potential, cope with life's stresses and make meaningful contributions to society. In the workplace, everyone deserves respect and fair treatment. No one should sacrifice their mental health for a toxic job.

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