



BOSSES BEHAVING BADLY

Abusive, overbearing, bullying – working for a nasty boss can seriously affect your self-confidence and job satisfaction. **Karen Higginbottom** discovers how to deal with a dreadful boss

In the recent film *Horrible Bosses*, three friends who've had enough of their respective overbearing and abusive bosses decide the only way left to get rid of them is murder. While their solution is certainly extreme, the sad fact is that horrible managers don't just exist in works of fiction – they can be a very real threat in every organisation.

Working for a toxic boss can hamper your career and damage your health. Psychologist Robert Hogan, author of *Personality and the Fate of Organisations*, says many staff surveys have shown the same result: three-quarters of workers feel the most stressful aspect of their job is their immediate boss.

Bad bosses are far from unusual in the UK, with nearly one in four employees rating their boss 'bad' or 'dreadful', according to research by consultancy The Good Boss Company in 2006. More than half of respondents had looked for another job because of their immediate manager.

"Employees can dread coming into work and it can lead to stress and reduce effectiveness," says Karen Osborn, national account manager at Thales Training and Consultancy. "A particularly toxic relationship can escalate into conflict. It may have a negative effect on one's ability to manage the situation, which is why seeking wiser counsel is so important."

A toxic boss can damage an employee's self-confidence, says Andrea Gregory, co-founder of The Good Boss Company. "It can undermine someone's self-esteem so they find they are less able to do tasks and lose confidence in their abilities."

There are also implications for an employee's mental and physical wellbeing when working for a toxic boss, says Professor Ariane Ollier-Malaterre of Rouen Business School in France: "Stress can lead to absenteeism, a fall in productivity and poor performance from an employee."

RUINING YOUR REPUTATION

But it's not just the staff member who suffers in a relationship with a toxic manager, she adds. "An organisation will get a bad reputation and lose talented people who will quit."

Not all toxic managers are the same – there are different types. Research

SIGNS THAT YOUR BOSS MAY BE TOXIC



11 CHECKLIST

- 01 **Passionate and enthusiastic one minute**, moody and disappointed the next
- 02 **Cynical and suspicious** about your approach
- 03 **Resistant to new ideas** and unwilling to take a chance on you
- 04 **Detached** and disinterested in you
- 05 **Seems pleasant on the surface** but actually just does their own thing, regardless of what you want
- 06 **Arrogant and blames others** for their mistakes
- 07 **Charming on the surface** but always has their own agenda
- 08 **Self-interested** and quick to take the credit
- 09 **Vague, wacky** and seems out of touch with reality
- 10 **Micromanaging**, fussy and critical
- 11 **Indecisive and overly concerned** about others opinions, especially those of a more senior level

Source: Louise Weston, Pearn Kandola

into leadership derailment by Hogan Assessment Systems uncovered 11 types of toxic bosses that link with 11 different kinds of personality disorders found in the working population, explains Louise Weston, business psychologist at consultancy Pearn Kandola (see checklist, left). “We know that a boss is the biggest source of stress in the workplace,” she says. “If you’re at work feeling demotivated or stressed, and your boss is the source of that, then there is potential for them to be a bad boss.”

Gregory outlines some of the several types of toxic managers: “There are bosses who use intimidation to get results, or ones who are overly critical. Then there are bosses who use sarcasm as put-downs and those who withhold praise when tasks have been done well. The latter create a feeling that an employee can never please that person.”

Some bosses can actually have a mild personality disorder, adds Gregory. “Some have a preference for working in a certain way and display very little flexibility.”

PERSONALITY CLASH

Not all bosses are bad. In some circumstances, it’s not a case of having a bad manager but instead is more likely to be a clash in personality due to mismatched communication styles. “It often comes down to different value sets of the employee and manager and how they communicate,” says Osborn.

If that’s the case, Osborn recommends that the employee takes the initiative. “Ask your manager how they want to receive information and what could be done differently. Be pro-active and talk to cross-functional managers to ask for tips on how to handle your boss. Another alternative could be to request external coaching to develop a strategy that will take the emotion out of the situation.”

Gregory advises that employees talk with their boss first before going to HR. “You need to flag up with your manager that there are areas of



Miranda Priestly is a classic nasty boss in *The Devil Wears Prada*

concern. Note any actions that have been agreed during the meeting and encourage your boss to meet again for a follow-up session.”

If the conversation doesn’t work out, there are more formal paths for an employee to pursue. “You can talk to HR and raise a formal grievance, but there may be ramifications if you go over your manager’s head rather than having a conversation with them first,” advises Gregory.

An alternative to the HR route is to use team meetings to bring up any issues, says Gregory. “You can work collaboratively with colleagues in an effort to solve the situation. For example, if you have a micro-managing boss, then in the team meeting one person could offer to follow through a task on their own and be backed by colleagues.”

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KAREN OSBORN

National account manager, Thales Training and Consultancy



FAMOUS FICTIONAL
BAD BOSSES

- **Miranda Priestly in The Devil Wears Prada** – a perfectionist boss and incredibly hard to please. Miranda is very quick to spot mistakes – even if you submit the perfect report, she will complain about the font size. You’re likely to wait for a long time before praise comes out of her mouth
- **Scrooge in A Christmas Carol** – a mean and mistrustful boss who is very cynical and suspects that everyone wants something from him. Very unlikely to trust his employees and will question everyone’s motives
- **David Brent in The Office** – an eccentric and off-the-wall boss who has no idea of social propriety and is out of touch with reality. He has a misguided sense of confidence in his own abilities and often is surprised that his ideas aren’t taken on board. In one word: deluded

Source: Louise Weston, Pearn Kandola

There are a few simple actions to take if the relationship with a toxic boss appears to be salvageable, advises Weston. “An employee needs to notice when the negative incidents occur. For example, a manager might start to micro-manage when they are under pressure, or be particularly volatile when there is a meeting. If an employee notices these behaviours, then they are more equipped to handle them.”

TALK IT OUT

Weston echoes Gregory’s advice that employees should have an informal chat with their toxic boss. “You need to sit down and talk about their specific behaviour rather than simply saying, ‘You’re a bad boss.’ During the conversation, focus on their behaviour and how you feel about it

because this will be difficult for them to argue against.”

If you have a bullying boss, check out your organisation’s bullying and harassment policy, says Weston. “That policy should give you a sense of what is acceptable at work. Make notes of what is happening and what is being said and talk it over with someone you trust. The next step is to take it to HR.”

In some severe cases, the right move is to leave the job, says Gregory. “There are some situations that are so unhealthy, the only thing to do is leave. These situations could be when your boss is unethical or you’re suffering from harassment or discrimination.”

If you cannot leave your job, there are coping strategies for employees, advises Chris Parry, head of leadership at consultancy Kenexa.

“Make sure you are seen and heard by a broad group of people rather than relying on your boss to promote your interests.” She also agrees with Gregory that employees should band together with others who are experiencing negative leadership so they can get results by showing strength in numbers.

Working for a toxic boss doesn’t have to be a completely negative experience, says Osborn. For example, employees can identify what type of boss to avoid working for in the future. A toxic boss can also give an employee an abject lesson in how not to manage and motivate people, says Jane Sunley, chief executive at learnpurple, a talent management consultancy. “You can learn what not to do when you get to the position occupied by your bad boss.” ■