

It's as inevitable as death and taxes. At some point, you're going to have to deal with a bad boss. Here's how to handle them

by Chris Ott



**MIKE ROWE**  
Manager

• If you've never had a bad boss, count yourself lucky. Bosses who lose their temper, play favorites or can't communicate—and that's just a start on the list of managerial misbehavior—can make going in to work annoying, humiliating and infuriating. And, unless you're independently wealthy, you're probably not in a position to tell your boss to take this job and shove it. What can you do if you get a boss who's the biggest obstacle to doing—and enjoying—your job?

"Becoming aware that this is a problem is the first step," says Christine Wilson, an independent career coach in New York City. If you do get stuck with a lousy boss, you'll need a strategy for dealing with the things that your boss does—or doesn't do—that drive you crazy.

But who are these bad bosses that might turn your life into a Dilbert strip? There are a few common types—but also a few common-sense ways of handling them.

### The Micro-Managing Boss

While some bosses expect too much (see the Unreasonable Boss, page 22), it can also be a problem when bosses expect too little. That is, some don't expect much independence or initiative because they don't leave room for it. Instead of delegating, a micro-managing boss gets involved in your work to the point of getting in your way.

Whether your boss is delegationally challenged—or whether it's just that a lot is riding on your work and the boss wants to be sure you can handle it—Joyce Lain Kennedy, author of *Resumes for Dummies* (3rd Edition) and a syndicated career columnist, says the solution is the same.

"Ask for a time when you can discuss the best ways to improve your contribution," Kennedy says. "Be deferential, not ready for a fight."

She suggests saying something like, "I think I can better support your efforts if I clearly understand the outcome you expect, and I would benefit from knowing more about your experience or preferred ways of working." Then tell your boss that you will report back on a regular basis to receive feedback on your progress, explaining: "The more you have reason to trust my performance, the more time you'll have to pursue other important matters."

If you approach it like this, "the boss will get the drift," Kennedy says. "Each time you receive a new assignment, do a mental checklist of desired outcomes, performance expected, land mines to avoid, resources available and deadlines. Then obtain confirmation from your boss that your understanding of the assignment agrees with how she sees it." After going through this process a few times, Kennedy says, "trust will build and you'll have fewer empowerment issues to ruin your day."

Bettina Seidman, a career management coach in Manhattan who works with individuals and groups, advises that micro-managing bosses can be a particular problem in technology fields. "This is work that requires linear thinking," she says, "and sometimes the people who do it best are the detail-oriented people, not the big picture people. It's a fundamental dilemma." Seidman offers some additional advice for dealing with this type of boss.

"If you're new to a company, it's important to wait a little bit and get a sense of the company culture," she says. What you perceive as micro-management might simply be the way things work. It might also be that your boss—or the whole organization—is particularly stressed, and that you'll be trusted more when a particular deadline has been met. It might even be that your boss is forced to micro-manage you in order to satisfy the demands of a micro-managing boss who's higher up the ladder.

"Success requires a certain understanding of what's going on around you," says Seidman, who suggests asking around—tactfully—to see if others perceive your boss the same way you do. You'll get a better sense of what's going on overall, and you might find some allies.

"If everybody's feeling the same way, then maybe two people can ask for a meeting with the manager and put together a discussion plan in advance." One way to do it, Seidman suggests, is not to talk about micro-management as such, but to provide examples of things that have affected your ability to get your work done.

What you don't want to do is simply charge into your boss's office one day and announce, "I'm having a problem with the way we work together," says Seidman. "How you present yourself, and the timing, are critical."

### The Ballistic Boss

Steve\* knew his boss had a temper—he just didn't know how bad it was until he ended up in the line of fire.

"A project that my team was working on had a number of delays, and one of them involved something that I was responsible for," he says. "The pressure was on, and we were all putting in long hours to catch up. But in the middle of that, my boss called me into his office, and with the door wide open, he started yelling about the delay, about how much it was costing, and about how it was making him look bad. Anyone in that whole corner of the building could easily hear.

"It was so ridiculous. I was doing everything I could, and yet he lost his temper and acted as if I was doing something to personally offend him. And of

\* Steve, as well as the other examples in this story, are real. For fear of losing their jobs, their names are not.



me about something like this, can you do it in private?" At the same time, however, Johnson says it's important to document your efforts to get your boss to behave more professionally. Keep a record with a brief description of what you said and when, and what your boss's response was. If your boss repeatedly blows up at you even after agreeing not to, a paper trail will come in handy if you have to take your complaint to the next level: your boss's boss.

"More than likely that boss will come in and will actually solve the problem for you. They don't like to lose good people, because it will cost them money to hire and train someone else," Johnson says. If your boss

course, he would rarely thank or congratulate us for the things we'd done well."

Dealing with a berserk boss is bad under any circumstances, but it's even worse when you haven't done anything wrong. How should you respond?

"When your boss treats you like an amoeba, the very best response in 99% of cases is not to react," says Joyce Lain Kennedy. "Acknowledge that you heard the diatribe—'I understand. Thank you for the information.'—but don't allow your face to get bent out of shape and don't mouth off. Go home and sleep on it.

"No one does his best thinking on an adrenaline rush. You'll have more power and better strategy the next day when the shock has worn off." If nothing else, Kennedy says, if you do end up getting into a shouting match even after trying to cool down, "you'll have had time to think of better counter punches."

At times, however, you might not have the option of a temporary retreat. If your boss calls you out on the mat in the middle of a meeting, for example, you might need to respond right then and there.

"When your boss is having a bad temper day and you must answer in detail, keep your voice low and your delivery slow," Kennedy says. "Speaking in moderate tones makes you seem like the adult and the belligerent boss like the child."

Looking more mature than your boss might impress your coworkers, but that might not be enough if the problem continues. If your boss is doing something that's unreasonable or unprofessional, Gerald Johnson, the author of *Bad Bosses, Bad Jobs, Fight Back!*, advises talking to the boss about it in private.

"Go to your boss and say, 'If you need to talk to

already has a reputation for blowing up, the records that you've kept can become a part of helping to do something about it. If nothing else, showing that you've tried to solve the problem yourself, before you took it to anyone else, makes it clear that you're not just a complainer and can boost your credibility.

A variation on the ballistic boss is the boss who only goes ballistic with certain people. Meanwhile, a "pet" of the boss might be allowed to get away with more and expected to do less.

"The fundamentals of being a good boss are respectful treatment and a concern for fairness in the workplace," says Johnson. Not getting that, he says, is one of the most common complaints that people have about jobs, even more than pay. "It's one of the things that gets people most upset." Favoritism can happen at all levels, Johnson says, "and it really does hurt people."

Boss favoritism creates unfair and uncomfortable situations, but again the way to deal with it involves documentation, says Johnson. Keep an eye on company policies that your boss is violating or overlooking, and be ready with specifics if you ever need to defend yourself or raise the subject with someone higher up. "If you sit back and do nothing about it," Johnson says, a boss's favoritism toward another employee "can reflect badly on you."

### The Unreasonable Boss

Cara's boss never lost her temper, but she had unrealistic expectations.

"No matter what I did, it was never enough for my first boss," she said. "She didn't realize how many

things I had become responsible for in the first year since I'd been hired."

A close relative of the boss who goes berserk is the boss who has expectations that range from unreasonable to impossible—and this is another case where documentation comes in handy.

"Some bosses see the whole picture, but they don't see all the details," says Johnson. "You have to show them."

To deal with a boss whose expectations are unrealistic, Johnson advises making a work study. That is, make a list of what you work on and for how long, over a period of a few days that are representative of your typical work load. "Then you take your work study and say, 'Look, I'm concerned about not being able to get the job done. Maybe you can help me.'"

The trick is in having the records to back up what you're saying. "You've got to document your efforts to get relief," Johnson says. Once you do that and make your boss aware of everything that is coming across your desk, the ball is in his or her court. When your boss has a better understanding of what you're contributing, you might get yourself some relief, Johnson says, and you might even get something more. You might get greater recognition, and Johnson even knows of employees who have been given a raise after making it clear how much they were doing.

In some cases your boss might expect too much of you and your coworkers without meaning any harm, but Johnson cautions against a similar type of boss that he calls the "finger-pointer."

"That boss doesn't say, 'What happened?' They say, 'Who did it?'" They typically look for someone to blame, instead of concentrating on fixing the problem.

If you're a scapegoat for this type of boss, Johnson advises paying particular attention to whatever performance reviews you might get. If your boss is taking something out on you in a written evaluation, Johnson advises against signing it. "Ask for another performance review. If you don't do that, it can become a part of your record." Once again, the key to your credibility—and the ability to make a case to others, if necessary—will likely be your ability to document the contribution you're making.

### The inexperienced Boss

"I thought my boss was actually afraid of me," said Mike, who took a job with a software start-up company after graduating. "He seemed like a nice enough guy, and I never really noticed anything odd during the job interviews. But after I'd worked there awhile, I realized that he never said much during meetings or in person. But then he would send me these emails, sometimes 'yelling' at me and other people who worked under him for things that we



never even knew about. It was especially bad because things would kind of bottleneck around this boss, and then all of a sudden everybody would get emails from him about things that needed to be done yesterday."

It's surprising but true: some bosses don't know how to be bosses. They might know their field well, but they don't know how to work with and manage other people—and it can be a particular problem in technology fields.

Seidman says that this scenario is not unusual and suggests that many people with introverted personalities tend to be drawn to technology-related work in the first place. On top of that, they might never have received training or practice managing people, especially if their technical skills moved them up quickly in their company or organization.

"They came out of school, they were smart, they won awards, they came into companies, they worked their tails off, they got promoted, and their whole lives they've always been recognized for their abilities, for



their skills,” Seidman says. “But all of a sudden they have to be able to talk to people, to manage people and to evaluate people. In some cases, they just don’t know how to do it.”

“They’re not dumb,” Seidman recognizes, “but just because you’re good at one thing doesn’t mean you’re good at another. In today’s world, you’ve got to be an expert and you’ve got to be a good manager.”

Christine Wilson says that discovering your boss doesn’t know how to be one can be particularly confusing if it happens to you right out of school, when you don’t have a lot of on-the-job experience and confidence yet yourself. “As a new employee, you go in thinking that your boss is supposed to know what to do, and they don’t,” Wilson says she consulted once with a boss who felt frustrated because his employees weren’t giving him reports on what they had been working on each day. She asked if he had simply ever asked them to do this, and he admitted, ‘No, I never have.’

In cases where your boss isn’t doing—or isn’t able to do—something that seems obvious, Wilson says it might help to accept your boss’s style (or the lack thereof) and learn to work around it.

“Figure out how the boss ticks,” she says. “Ask the boss periodically whether there’s anything else you

can be doing. In this world of 24–7, it’s probably also useful to ask your boss what kind of reporting they want from you.” Bosses might not want you to talk to them in person everyday but would appreciate a quick email summary. On the other hand, they might only want to hear when you’ve finished a major project, not in-between. Adapt as much as you can to their style.

“You can’t usually change your boss’s behavior. You can only change yours to deal with what’s there,” says Wilson.

### Other Advice

Bad bosses are out there, but some conflicts can be avoided before they occur. Be careful, says Christine Wilson, of “complaining too much about your boss” to people who seem sympathetic but may not be.

“We live in a world where what we’d like to do is blame the boss,” Wilson says, but going too far and seeming like a “malcontent” can damage your career. It’s also important to keep in mind the possibility that your boss might not simply be “bad,” but that “you haven’t figured out how the two of you click.”

One way to prevent or minimize problems is to be absolutely clear about what your boss’s expectations are at the beginning, when you’re starting a new job or project. “I’m a great believer that a person being given a task should take notes and make sure to feed-back to the boss what your understanding was. That gives clarity and confidence that this is what happened at that time.”

When measures like taking notes, trying to adapt to your boss’s style and other methods aren’t enough though, it can be tempting to head out the door. But what if you can’t leave or if it’s not a wise career move?

“It’s a large problem if you clash with your boss on your first job—you need that reference!” says Joyce Lain Kennedy. “So do your best to grin and bear it until you can escape, then be classy about it. Look as good going away as you did coming in.”

“You might also be learning a great deal despite that awful boss,” says Wilson, who adds that it might just be a matter of hanging in there until you get everything that you can out of the job. For example, says Wilson, “you can just become tougher by noticing that your boss yells at everybody, not just you.”

“Dot every ‘i’ and cross every ‘t’ while you’re looking for the next job,” Wilson says. “You manage your boss by managing yourself.” ▲

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