

Getting on the Same Page with...Difficult Bosses

4 Simple Steps to Getting Started

I didn't know I needed to count my blessings about all the good managers I've worked for until I went to a biotech start-up and experienced the "boss from hell." By nature, I am a very positive person and can find something good to say about almost anyone – until I went to work for someone we'll call "John." In my job interview, he was full of charm and warmth, and led me to believe that I was to take charge of a nascent business with all the resources and management backing that dream-MBAs would covet. I soon discovered a different reality. Every morning, he called a meeting at 9:00 sharp that lasted way too long, and provided way too little value. The meetings were his bully pulpit where he could shout orders and feel important. Afterwards people would congregate behind closed doors to discuss the waste of time (we'll let the irony pass of the time they wasted complaining). As part of his feeling important, John would stomp around the halls and decide who he would invite to join him for lunch. I lasted one year and never joined him for lunch even once. This, I felt, was a good thing along with my resignation.

As is the case with all of life's negative experiences, we learn something. I realized that I had taken for granted the sheer decency and capabilities of my previous managers. Not wanting to risk another bad boss and thinking that the business world had gone haywire in who it promoted, I decided it was time to be my own boss and hang out a consulting shingle. It turns out, of course, that being your own boss isn't so easy either. Self-criticism, pep talks, paranoia and confidence all need to perfectly blend together so that you can stay focused and effective. Still, distance from "John" and my client experiences led me to conclude that there is usually a way to successfully manage difficult bosses.

First, a client story: I have a smart client (we'll call him "Tony") who has a big job managing the business strategy, along with overseeing joint ventures and acquisitions. He is widely recognized to be excellent at his job by everyone but his manager (we'll call her "Shirley."). After a final presentation for a project I had completed under the guidance of Tony, Shirley asked me to stay behind. I had known the

meeting had not gone well based on the testy interaction between Tony and Shirley. With Tony out of the picture, Shirley could tell me her concerns and not risk an emotional and unproductive conversation. I followed up with Tony and relayed Shirley's concerns. Tony, as expected, dismissed all of her comments. I then engaged in a very frank conversation: "Tony, I am going to coach you. You and Shirley are both fighting to be the smartest person in the room. Let Shirley win. She needs it more than you do."

My client might have momentarily hated me, but he recognized wisdom and was able, over time, to reengineer a relationship that went from completely dysfunctional to tolerable and productive. This story is a good intro to Step 1 of how to manage a difficult boss.

Step 1 - Identify your particular frustration with your boss and ask yourself, "Why does he act that way?"

Bosses come in all kinds of challenging varieties. We begin by identifying the style or mix of styles that create the problem. Some common examples include, the:

- **Meeting Maniac:** This boss wants a meeting for every reason and season. He feels that if he has a meeting, he is addressing an issue and being productive. The problem is that with so many meetings, there is little time for actually doing the work.
- **Glory Hog:** This boss loves your work so much that he frequently forgets to acknowledge your efforts as he takes credit for a job well done. The glory hog will often choose to not invite you to the meeting where the work is being shared, or feign forgetfulness after the fact.
- **Control Freak:** This boss emails, voicemails, and generally checks in way too often to make sure that you are on the right path as defined by him. No detail is too small for his purview. He usually doesn't enjoy the process of brainstorming or letting his people loose to discover or think outside the box. The "box" is his box.

- **Passed-Over Pessimist:** This boss has been passed over for promotions too many times and has grown disillusioned. He sinks morale by making everything seem futile and pointless.
- **Supreme Documenter:** This boss wants to make sure that all processes are followed, that new processes are created to improve upon the old ones, and that adherence is fully documented. Documentation makes him feel safe and affirms a job well done.
- **Mr. No Excuses, Just Results:** This boss doesn't care about the details which sound to him like potential excuses. He loves shouting orders and wants the results neatly handed to him. How you got there, or who you stepped over (or on) is not a concern. His close relative is Mr. McUrgent where everything needs to be done pronto!
- **Hands-on Harry:** This boss is often a closet individual contributor who as a strong performer was promoted to management. The problem is that his personality and job pleasure still align with actually doing the work. Hands-on Harry might ask you to scoot over so he can "show" you how to do something and he usually hates being interrupted while figuring out a problem. Bottom line: Harry would rather make than manage.

Understanding helps because it is the basis for engineering a solution that addresses his needs and yours. Once Tony decided that he wouldn't hear "Job well done" from Shirley, he sought it elsewhere. Shirley was braving her own political battles and needed to boost her self-confidence and identify her value added. This understanding became the basis for Tony's shift in thinking.

Step 2 – Ask yourself, "What do I you need from my manager?"

Problems can't be fixed unless we know what we need. Separate big frustrations from nuisances (as we should be doing elsewhere in our life). For example, do we need a *pep talk* after a slew of bad news? Does our manager need to provide us more *resources*? Extra *training*? Maybe we need an *obstacle buster* who will tackle organizational challenges that can sabotage our success. Two prominent areas where we often need help are: Obtaining broad *management buy-in*, and placing projects in a *larger context*. These two areas deserve elaboration:

- **Management buy-in:** There is doing the work, and selling the work. For work to reach its potential, it often needs to be promoted to senior management. From this support, project expansion, resources, and general glory may follow.
- **Bigger thinking:** Sometimes we need to see our work in the context of a bigger plan. We need to understand, “How will my work be leveraged?” or “What is next after we accomplish this?” or “How will this strengthen the company?” Finally, “Where does this work fit in with our larger strategic goals?” Managers can inspire us with good answers to these questions.

Step 3 – Identify where you and your boss are not on the Same Page: Where do you both view the work very differently? In step 3, we identify the divergence so that we can configure a solution. Tony knew, for example, that he and Shirley usually disagreed on problem resolution. That information was used to change his approach which will highlighted in step 4. Common examples of where we are often on a different page from our manager include:

- **What is the best use of our time?** Do all those meetings and/or documentation add value or detract from other more productive efforts?
- **What is the business strategy?** A steady stream of urgent priorities, combined with too many meetings, and a manager who doesn't relish communication can

often lead to confusion about the business strategy. We can't hit the mark if we don't understand it.

- **What are realistic performance targets?** The product simply can't perform that well. The cost structure can't be that dramatically reduced. Our boss is selling something we can't deliver.

- **What are my personal growth goals?** A discussion of growth goals can help bridge the gap between our view and our manager's view of us. It helps to have a manager who champions our growth, even though we are the ultimate owners.

- **Why is the ratio of fun to sweat so low?** While most people know that work is a four letter word, it should sometimes also be a three letter word (F-U-N) and managers can help create the climate. Sometimes, managers don't even realize that the four letters is back.

Step 4 – Engage in Constructive Conversation:

There is a big difference between whining and fixing. Being thoughtful about the problems and offering constructive solutions shows maturity and good faith. It pays to think about the format of discussion and how to best communicate your concerns. If you have an analytical, data-driven manager, you might present a chart that summarizes the differing views and possible solutions such as in the example below:

| <i>Discussion Area</i> | <i>My View</i> | <i>Manager's View</i> | <i>Areas of Variation</i> |
|------------------------|----------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Top Priority | | | |
| Resources Needed | | | |
| Hurdles | | | |
| Timeframe | | | |
| Organizational Support | | | |
| Measurement Metrics | | | |
| The "Fix" | | | |

If you have a more verbally oriented manager, anecdotes might better frame the discussion. In either case, the goal is to take the dissatisfaction, make it concrete and offer remedies.

What did Tony do as he pushed the “reset button” on his relationship with Shirley? He began by making an effort to listen more. Rather than disdain, he showed support. Then, when designing his presentations, Tony made sure to allow plenty of room for a solution which could be discussed and created in the course of the meeting. Sometimes, to use his words, he even “put a hole in the presentation” so that someone as smart as Shirley could spot it and suggest a fix. It might sound silly. Relationships often are. However, the end result was good for the business and made work almost a three letter word.