

COPING WITH A PROBLEM BOSS

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Is your manager making your work life unhappy? Here, we reveal the tactics you need to help you deal with the difficult powers-that-be.

By Sarah Marinos.

The average Australian works 40 hours a week, while almost one in five of us work more than 50 hours a week, according to recent employment figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. That means many of us are spending more time with our boss and less time with family and friends.

So what happens if you have the boss from hell? We've asked some workplace experts to give us a rundown of the boss you may be faced with and how to handle them.

THE 'CONTROL FREAK' BOSS

The signs: Everything has to be done their way or no way. They're perfectionists who see 'delegation' and 'initiative' as dirty words. They come up with all the ideas and want to put them into action as well. They nitpick, watch the clock and thrive on procedures, policies, rules and schedules.

The problems: You'll struggle to progress because you'll rarely be given a chance to learn new skills. You'll feel bored and frustrated because you won't be able to problem-solve yourself. You'll do the boring, mundane work – because that's all a control-freak boss will trust you to do.

How to handle them: "Be a receptive follower," says Melbourne psychologist, Meredith Fuller. "Every time you try to be independent you'll be seen as challenging and that will increase your boss's fear factor. Do lots of head-nodding and agreeing, and then do your job the way you want, but present it in the way you boss wants you to. Always present new ideas and requests in a written format with deadlines and bullet points – don't jump into your boss's office and babble about new ideas because they will feel out of control and freeze up."

THE 'BEST FRIEND' BOSS

The signs: They are the people pleasers who are more worried about being popular than doing their job. The boundaries between work and private life are blurred because your boss wants to hear all about your marriage problems and kids. They want to sort your life out.

The problems: "Often this boss had cold, stern parents who never valued them or wanted them," says Fuller. "Or as they are idealists who believe we should all live in peace and love each other. They are people-driven, and often don't get much done because they are too busy dealing with staff emotions. You may find you don't reach your goals and objectives because so much time is wasted. It's hard to say no to them, too because you don't want to hurt their feelings."

How to handle them: "This boss says yes to everything *their* boss asks them to do because they want to be liked. But it might not be possible for you to deliver what your boss has promised," says life coach Lindsay Tighe. "You have to be assertive and say no when something is impossible." Learn to gently cut off personal chitchat. When your boss asks you how you're *really* feeling, says Fuller, "Say, I'm fine, I'm happy here and I appreciate I can always come to you if there is a problem. So thanks for asking ... now I'll just keep plugging away at this report."

THE 'BULLY' BOSS

The signs: They communicate by yelling and using their position of power to threaten and intimidate you. The bully boss can also humiliate you by highlighting every mistake you make and ridiculing your efforts. Or they will freeze you out of meetings, promotions and the office party. Your workmates may be too scared to support you because they don't want to incur the bully's wrath.

The problems: When you are stressed and upset, you're less productive and less able to think clearly, so your work standards may slip. Your bully boss can also block you from moving up the ranks or broadening your skill base.

How to handle them: Bullies make a lot of noise because they doubt their ability to do their job. "Seek support from your colleagues and, when your boss is rude, be assertive but not aggressive so they know you won't stand for it anymore," says Tighe. If necessary, do a course or read a book on assertiveness. "But for now, when you are being bullied, don't rise to the bait and become aggressive. Take a few deep breaths, count to 10 and when you don't react your boss may stop using that tactic, once it has no power over you," says Tighe. Various laws protect the health and safety of employees. "If your boss refuses to change or if you can't confront them about their behaviour, contact the human resources department: they will have policies to deal with bullying. If the company doesn't take your complaint seriously, do you really want to work for a business that allows people to be treated in this way?"

THE 'RIDES ON YOUR COAT-TAILS' BOSS

The signs: They will never thank you for your contribution at work and they will steal your hard work and pass it off as their own every time. They are big-picture thinkers who are uninterested in the daily operations of the business. They prefer to sit in their office, daydreaming about where the business will be in 10 years from now. Meanwhile, they'll leave the hard graft to you.

The problems: This boss has often been promoted above their capabilities and because they are so hands-off, you'll have to be independent and a quick learner because they won't give you any guidance. You'll have to work hard, too, to pick up the slack. Your boss will tell you having more on your plate is good for your career development, but really, they're neglecting their responsibilities.

How to handle them: Learn to manage yourself and find another mentor in your workplace who can guide you. "Don't get frustrated that you are doing all the work and your boss is getting paid more. Let them fall on their sword and be in the right place at the right time when that happens," says Fuller. "If you try to undermine this person by complaining they're never around and you have to do their work, they'll make you look pathetic and whining. These people are good political animals who have the ear of decision makers. So don't whine; build your own empire, stay professional and wait for their demise."

THE 'TIT-FOR-TAT' BOSS

The signs: They get their job done by wheeling and dealing. They are always in a corner or behind a closed office door, working out which person can help them get further ahead and what they can get in return. The workplace is a game of chess for the tit-for-tat boss and they'll collect people who make them look good.

The problems: Once this boss starts doing you favours, they'll expect you to repay the favour with interest. They'll help you move ahead in your career but they're out for themselves, so over time, they may ask you to perform dubious tasks that could put your reputation and job in jeopardy. For example, they might take a three hour lunch and enlist you to hide their time-wasting from management.

How to handle them: To survive the tit-for-tat boss, you have to be prepared to turn a blind eye to their indiscretions – and never tell anyone about them. This relationship works best for two ambitious people. However, you have to be assertive so you can say no when you feel uncomfortable about your boss's requests. If you've had enough, move on. Tell your boss you've learned a lot but would like to take your career in another direction.