

PART **5**

**SUCCESSFULLY
DEALING WITH
DIFFICULT PEOPLE AT
WORK (PEOPLE SKILLS)**

CHAPTER 31

DEALING WITH A DIFFICULT BOSS

One common complaint expressed to me by engineers throughout the United States is “My Boss Is Driving Me Nuts!” This was a complaint expressed by all types of engineers at all levels in the company. Well, if you feel this way, you can take comfort in knowing that you are not alone [1–4]. In this chapter, I try to address this common complaint and some simple things you can do to handle and control your boss so that they do not drive you nuts any more.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IS BEST

In all of the cases discussed in this chapter the first and best solution is to try and sit down with your boss and talk things out. Effective communication with the boss is best. Often the boss may not know that their habits are driving you nuts. The most professional thing you can do is simply have a talk about the things bothering you. In most cases, this can quickly solve the problem.

When you talk with your boss, you can set up the situation for success by getting your boss away from their office. Meet at some neutral place like the cafeteria or conference room. Some place quiet and peaceful where you can both talk openly and yet not be afraid of being overheard by other employees.

You should have a professional and sincere tone in your voice. You can start out by explaining why you asked to meet. You are bothered by your boss’ habit of and you would like to let him or her know it is bothering to the point where it is affecting your work.

The hope is that open and honest communication can quickly resolve the issue. You should not threaten nor put down the boss. Simply state the problem and what you would like changed. Stay away from emotional and put-down statements. Remember nobody, including you or your boss,

likes to receive negative feedback. Experts recommend that you start with first discussing several things you like about the boss and then transition to the problem. Make sure you have specific examples of when this occurred and how it made you feel. Do not talk in vague generalities and hypothetical situations; good solid examples are the best.

Have a recommended action to correct the problem and ask if the boss will do this. Talk through issues and make sure both of you leave with clear expectations of each other's needs. Finish on a positive note thanking your boss for taking the time to listen and understand.

I truly feel this is the best way to deal with these annoying habits that are affecting the quality of your work. Now let's look at the classic examples.

MY BOSS IS A MICRO-MANAGER

"My boss is a micro-manager and he or she wants to micro-manage every task I do and it is driving me nuts." Does this sound like something you are encountering? If so, relax. There are simple actions you can take to quickly turn this around.

First you need to understand the reasons why the boss tries to micro-manage employees. It stems from two basic problems. The first is they feel insecure about your ability to handle a problem. The second reason is they are unsure about their own ability to do their job and therefore want to make sure everything gets done right. Once you understand the root cause is insecurity, then it is easy to take steps to counter this.

Most people re-act to a micro-manager by running in the other direction and avoiding contact with the micro-manager. This reaction only makes the situation worse since it fuels the insecurity of the boss. The boss feels even more left in the blind and unsure of your progress. A very insecure position to be in. The avoidance tactic only causes the boss to want to micro-manage more.

► **Career Tip.** Micro-manage a micro-manager to turn the behavior around.

Instead of avoiding the micro-manager, the best thing to do is micro-manage back. In other words, turn the situation around where you are constantly seeking out the boss's advice before you do anything. Every little thing you can think of, go to the boss and discuss the opinions and what makes "best" sense. This way you are allowing the micro-manager to see how you think and how you arrive at solutions or recommended actions. Discuss everything, the pros and cons, the order of doing tasks, which are most important, which are least important, what to do if things fail.

For most people this is too painful to do and they would rather avoid than take a direct frontal approach. You do not need to be abrasive nor argue. You calmly and without emotion, in a very professional manner, discuss options

and let the micro-manager direct you to the best approach. You do this for every little task you have. Be polite, ask for their time to discuss, make sure you drag out all the conversations, and thoroughly discuss all the unimportant details.

After about a week of this you will start to see how the micro-manager thinks and what insecurities are bothering them. By doing this, the micro-manager starts to build trust in you and your decision process. The micro-manager's insecurities will start to subside. As you go through options and the micro-manager provides you direction, comment on how you were just thinking the same thing. You are highlighting how you both think alike. Stay away from any direct confrontation. This will only fuel the desire to micro-manage you more. If you are flexible and the micro-manager's suggestions are technically sound then accept them and move on.

At the end of the first week of many meetings with the micro-manager, you should start to see them back off. This is a good sign, but you must continue the effort if you are going to be successful.

The second week is the time for a full-court press. The second week you increase the amount of time and make the decisions even seem more trivial but needing the micro-manager's approval.

You tie up the micro-manager as much as possible. If you are doing this correctly, the micro-manager will appear at your desk about halfway through the second week without being asked, and tell you to make more decisions on your own. The micro-manager will fess up that they no longer have the time for all your questions and discussions and they trust you to make the decisions.

At this point, if you did it right, they will be avoiding you! And the last thing they want to do is get tied up again meeting. Problem solved! You have the micro-manager's approval to take action and no longer need their input or approval on every little thing.

UNABLE TO MAKE A DECISION

"My boss is unable to make a decision; I cannot get anything approved. If only he or she could make a decision we could move on. The way it is now, we are stopped dead in limbo land." This is another common complaint. If you feel this way, you are not alone.

The basic root cause of this problem is that the boss does not want to make a bad decision and end up doing the wrong thing. Most likely the boss has made a decision in the past and it turned out to be the wrong choice. When it came time to place the blame, the boss was the person who ended up taking it. Consequently, the boss has learned to delay the decision until they are absolutely necessary and only make the decision if it is a sure, successful thing.

Employees also contribute to the boss's inability to make a decision. The employee is often the most knowledgeable about what has been going on

and fails to realize that the boss is not at the same level of understanding as the employee. Consequently, the employee only brings the decision to the boss and not all the supporting data regarding the best choices. The employees feel this is an easy decision since they are the closest to the problem and know what to do and the boss should just trust them. Without having all the supporting data, instinct tells the boss that the best thing to do to minimize the chances for failure is delay the decision until further data can be collected.

A tactic some employees take in response to the delay by the boss is to go to the boss at the last minute and, hopefully, force the boss to make a quick decision and get on with it. This only compounds the problem since it makes the boss pressured into a decision they are not prepared to make.

You need to break this pattern. Here are simple steps you can take as an employee to get the boss to make decisions:

1. Forecast in advance and discuss with your boss (at least one week on big items) that a decision will be needed by a certain date. Make sure you highlight the consequences of delaying the decision in terms of extra cost or schedule delays. (This reduces the boss's fear of being rushed into a bad decision.)
2. Several days before the decision is required, educate your boss about the factors going into the decision. Bring them up to your level of understanding. Make sure you cover all the options and the pros and cons associated with the decision and generate a chart to support your findings. Writing it down in an organized fashion often helps. (In our boss's mind, this will reduce the risk associated with making the decision.)
3. Finally ask them point blank, can you make a decision on this date and if not, what other information do they need so the decision can be made?
4. Make sure you have backup plans identified if anything goes wrong so that you can recover quickly. (This is like an insurance policy to the boss and calms their nerves about making the decision.)

If you follow these steps, the boss should be able to make decisions in a timely manner and allow you to do your work and not delay the tasks.

► **Career Tip.** Involve your boss early and often in the decision-making process to get them to make decisions quickly.

Will you have to do this for every task? Only for a short period of time! Hopefully the boss will begin to develop trust in you after you have gone through this several times. Each time through it, the boss should be developing more trust and confidence in your ability to make the correct decision. With trust and confidence in you, the boss will start to delegate the decision

process more to you. The boss can easily see all the effort you are putting into making the best decision and eliminating risk and chances of failure.

CANNOT STAY FOCUSED

"My boss cannot stay focused. I go to him or her about a single issue and before I know it, we are discussing six or seven other things that have nothing to do with the original issue!"

This boss has what is called in engineering terms, a diverging process or diverging series. They start out on one subject and bring in related adjacent subjects. Then they repeat the process on the adjacent subject and bring in other related adjacent subjects and before you know it, you are discussing items that have nothing to do with what you originally started out with. You do not converge to a single solution but quickly generate an indeterminate state with infinite solutions or no solutions.

The root cause of this problem stems from the boss wanting to cover every possible related subject to make sure all the bases are covered. However, the boss quickly loses track of what was the original purpose of the meeting.

You, as the employee, need to control this and bring your boss back and focus on the reason you are there. To control this, you first have to recognize when it is starting and take steps to refocus the emphasis of the discussion.

When you refocus the conversation back to the original subject at hand, you should do this in a professional and non-threatening manner. Remember, the boss does not realize he or she is moving off into other directions you do not want to go; they simply think they are helping you. Here are some simple non-threatening and professional questions you can ask or statements you can make to help them refocus.

1. I think we may be getting off the track a little; how does this relate to the original subject of
2. I do not see the relation between this and what I originally came to talk about. Can you help me understand?
3. Please clarify for me where we are going with this; I am lost.
4. This is a good subject and I would like to discuss with you after, but for now can we focus on and get through this and then come back to

These are not the only questions and clarifications you can ask. The point is to pick one you are comfortable with using and use it. Remember not to be abrasive but professional. People indicate to me that they are not sure they can do this. If they do not change and do something different, I point out that they are doing the exact same thing over and over and getting the same, but expecting a different, result. I believe a famous scientist (Albert Einstein) pointed out that this is a sign of stupidity.



FIGURE 31-1 Paralysis by analysis.

PARALYSIS BY ANALYSIS

In this scenario, the manager or lead engineer usually has to analyze every possible option only to come to the conclusion that nothing is going to work successfully. At this point the manager feels trapped or in a paralysis state — unable to move on anything. All work must come to a stop until the manager figures out what to do next (Figure 31-1).

The basic problem is the manager has put the emphasis of the analysis on what will not work instead of identifying what will work. He or she is looking at how empty the glass is instead of how full.

There are several actions you can take to get your manager through this and move on. First is to review the basic assumptions going into the analysis: what is considered unacceptable and what is considered just good enough. Maybe one of the potential solutions has a problem but the performance is acceptable for now. Review your assumptions and see if they are really necessary to meet your goal. If you can relax one of your assumptions that allow a solution to meet your objectives, you are out of the paralysis state. As a first step, try working through your assumption with your manager.

The second thing you can do is help your manager realize all solutions have a problem but the problems are manageable. Many managers want the perfect solution with no potential failures, so they think of all the possible bad scenarios that can happen.

Another action is to generate a comparison chart of the possible approaches and the good and bad points. Sometimes when you put it all down in writing in an organized fashion, it is easier to make a decision and move on. All the terrible problems do not seem that big, and often one solution will clearly stand out above the rest making the decision easy to make.

TAKES CREDIT FOR ALL MY WORK

“I do all the work and my boss takes all the credit!” This is another common complaint. There are several things you can do on this one. First, you must be direct and upfront with your boss to solve this problem. Simply sit down with your boss and express your concerns about lack of getting credit. Make sure you are professional and non-threatening in your discussion. Tell your boss you would like to get more credit for the work. Ask if they are highlighting in reports that you are the one responsible for the work. Give specific examples if you can of where you feel the boss is taking credit for your work. Typical examples are the boss taking credit in weekly reports for your work to upper management and never reporting that you are the one actually doing the work. Or another case is when demos are given and you are never involved. Your boss may not realize he or she is doing this, and simply bringing it to their attention, is enough to get the situation corrected.

► **Career Tip.** The first step to correcting the boss from taking credit for your work is to confront him or her directly and ask for more credit.

If this does not work then you will have to be more aggressive. Some of the more aggressive actions include sending a copy of your weekly activity reports to your boss’s boss directly. The activity report should clearly highlight all your activities and the progress you are making.

If you are required to demonstrate things, make sure you are the only one that can run the demo. You hold the passwords and knowledge how to run things, so that way you are visibly running things when it is time to get credit.

If you issue reports or charts, put your name as the source in the footer. This way when people see the charts or read the report, your name is identified.

If you take pictures of the equipment or hardware, make sure you are in the picture, so your face gets associated with doing the work.

One final action is for you to share your feelings of disappointment and how you feel you have no option but to perhaps not work for them. However, this can quickly backfire since the boss may want you to leave and quickly arrange for this. This is only a safe card to play when there is absolutely not a single person in the whole wide world who can do what you are doing!

KNOW IT ALL

The “Know It All” boss simply believes their job is to share all their knowledge with employees since they already know what is the best thing to do. They have more knowledge than anyone on the team and by sharing and educating people, the whole team benefits. They feel a need to explain how everything works since they clearly have more knowledge than anyone they are talking with.

These types of bosses quickly drive employees crazy by constantly explaining every detail and why this works this way or that. They often have bad listening skills and seldom ask for your input. This leads to the tendency of people to quickly tune them out.

There are several methods for dealing with this type of boss. One action is to simply not respond and do not ask any questions. Sooner or later the boss is going to have to stop talking and involve you in the conversation so he or she can get your input on progress. By not talking, you are signaling to the boss that you are not taking part in this one-sided conversation. By asking questions and acknowledging their good points, you are only reinforcing to the “Know-It-All” boss that he or she is doing the right things and they need to continue to explain and educate you. They are looking for this type of behavior and interchange.

Another action is to constantly ask questions. Simply ask, “how does that work?” I have used the technique of asking “how does that work,” with great success. One boss tried to keep up with my all questions just to show his knowledge and capability to explain everything. I asked question after question on everything he brought up until he was to the point where he realized he was far from the original question and needed to refocus back to the original question. He was worn out.

CONSTANTLY RE-PRIORITIZING MY WORK

Constantly re-ordering priorities is also a very common problem. The root cause of constantly re-ordering work priorities is the boss simply believes that every time he or she thinks of something that needs to be done, it is their job to assign it to you. They feel they are paid to think of things to be done, and since they rely on their memory rather than lists or schedules, they want to make sure it is in queue of things to do.

This can be bothersome to some people since they do not know whether to rush the rush they are working on or rush the new rush. The employee is continually put in the difficult situation of having to start a new task before they can complete the last task.

This is an easy one to change around. Keep a list of the tasks you are working and in the order you are working on them. Then, when the boss shows up with a new unplanned task, you simply go through the list and identify where it falls on the list. If it is so important you must start right away, then you ask the boss what task do you want to take off the list or which task should you stop working on? This should quickly stop the behavior and make the boss think before coming up with a new task. The boss will realize that they are constantly in the mode of telling you to stop working on the task they gave you yesterday and work on the new one. This highlights to the boss the delay in getting the task from yesterday done because they have just asked you to drop everything for today's project.

You should also be pointing out that you are unable to bring a task to completion since you have to shift your attention to a new task before the old one was closed. Point out that this is very inefficient and you are wasting time, resources, schedule, and increasing cost by doing this.

BOSS' WAY OR THE HIGHWAY

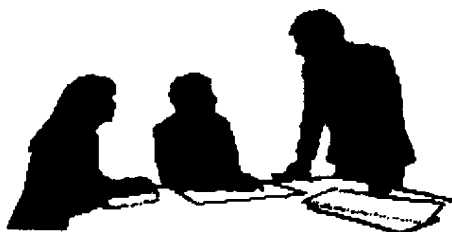
Many bosses firmly believe if people would just follow their direction, things would go better. Simply follow their instructions and we would not have these problems in the first place. This attitude can best be characterized by the saying "The boss' way or the highway." (Figure 31-2) This attitude by the boss creates mindless people who just follow directions and do whatever the boss wants, even if it is wrong. Trying to reason with this type of boss or change this behavior is an act in futility. This is like trying to reason with a tank driver. Tanks rollover everything in sight, take no enemies, crush people, and kill everything that stands in their way.

You only have two choices on this one: join the boss or flee. If you join the boss, you must be able to take orders and execute without question. Questioning an order is an act of insubordination! On the other hand, if you can execute orders flawlessly, you will be rewarded. You become a team member, and after time, will be allowed to give orders also. You must first prove yourself and your loyalty to the leader before becoming a commander in these ranks—capable of thinking and doing things for yourself.

The alternative is to flee and look for another position where more sanity exists. Some place where you are allowed to think for yourself and have a difference of opinion.

► **Career Tip.** Your way or the boss' way. You decide!

Obviously, I have overdramatized these potential actions to see if you identify with one more than the others. If you find yourself clearly aligning with either one of the oversimplified reactions, then it is a clear indication what you should do.



Let me make this perfectly clear so there are no misunderstandings about what I want you to do and not to do!

FIGURE 31-2 Boss' way or the highway.

If you are not sure what you want to do, then you are in trouble. Oftentimes, the work is great and it keeps you around under these circumstances. But the problem is, you cannot stand the “my way or the highway” attitude of the boss. If you find yourself in this position, then you have a very tough decision to make: stay and work at it or seek work elsewhere. There is no simple answer for this; you have to examine your position fully and decide what is really best for you!

MY BOSS ALWAYS SAYS THE OPPOSITE OF WHAT I SAY

“No matter what I say, my boss always says the opposite. If I say white, my boss says black. I say black, my boss says white.” Does this sound familiar to you? If so, then you have a problem with your boss. Generally, this behavior is associated with you and your boss starting off on the wrong foot as they say. Another cause could be your boss’ belief you are not competent. Employees contribute to this type of reaction by trying to tell the boss what to do or only offering a single solution to a problem when many solutions exist.

This behavior is easy to overcome. When presenting a solution or choice to your boss, always present at least two or three with no real indication of what your choice is. Next you must let the boss pick first. Never pick first; if you pick first or come with only one preferred solution, you are setting the boss up to pick the opposite of you. After the boss has made the final selection, then comment on how you were thinking the same and how you both think alike. This will diminish this difference between you and the boss over time. Also, it is very important to observe your boss’ facial expression and body language when you inform him or her that you were thinking the same thing. If a smile occurs, it is an indication that the boss is pleased with your choice and you are moving the relationship to be more on the same side rather than opposing sides. If the boss’ facial expressions are one of surprise or worry that you both selected the same solution, then you have more work ahead.

► **Career Tip.** Let your boss select the solution first and then agree!

Another method of getting the boss to pick your preferred solution is to select first the opposite solution that you wanted. Then relying on nature to take its course, the boss will select your preferred solution that is the one you really wanted.

All of the recommended solutions will work. You can alternate between them if you have to. The key is to stop setting yourself up for failure and take positive steps to change this behavior.

THE BOSS HAS FAVORITES

“My boss has favorites in our group. The boss always goes to them first or listens to only them.” If this is your problem then you have a tough problem.

First you must look inward and examine what you want to do. If you have the attitude that you should not have to play this game and you do not really want to become a favorite, then your best career option is to make a job change, leave the group, and find another group. Having this attitude and staying in the group is only going to make the situation worse and eventually your attitude and resentment is going to show in your work. By not buying into the idea of becoming a favorite and working toward this, is basically saying that you do not support the boss and the boss needs to change. Trying to change the boss to conform to your ideals is a very career-limiting move.

► **Career Tip.** Trying to change the boss to conform to your ideals is a very career-limiting move. Spend the effort on improving yourself.

The problem you must solve is how to become one of the “favorites.” The first step to solving this problem is to observe who the favorites are in the group and how they act. How are their actions different from yours? Are they complimenting the boss in front of others and supporting his ideas with all their efforts? Do they speak highly of the boss’ actions and have a good mental attitude? Do they get the tough jobs done when it is critical? Basically, by studying the favorites and their actions you are identifying the potential reasons the boss likes them so much. Your goal is to emulate their actions and hopefully you will migrate to a “favorite” standing.

The second step is to have a conversation with the boss about who gets what assignments in the group and how does the boss select who he or she goes to? During this conversation you need to ask open-ended questions, like what traits are you looking for in an employee? How can you and the boss better work together? Answers to these questions should provide guidance on how you can change your behavior. Sometime during the conversation you need to be direct and forward and mention that you feel that the boss is assigning tasks in a way that suggests to the others in the group, who are certainly the favorites. The boss may not even realize this is occurring and correct the situation once it has been pointed out. Make sure you have concrete examples that you can cite at this point in the conversation. A perfect example of this might be when the boss leaves, the same person is always put in charge of the group. A good management strategy is to alternate this responsibility around to all the members of the group. Another concrete example is always picking the same person to present the results of the entire group to upper management. In any case, make sure you have specific examples that you can point to on why you feel the way you do.

One of the reasons the boss may be using favorites is because of their ability to perform the task. The boss may feel there are only certain people they can count on. If this is the case, then you want to point out to the boss that you would like to be considered for these assignments. If you need further training and development you are willing to take the training so that the boss can feel

confident in your ability to perform the tasks. You would like the opportunity to show the boss you can perform the tasks and you will make sure the boss is not disappointed.

► **Career Tip.** If your attitude is one of learning, willing to make improvements, and willing to go the extra mile then you should be successful.

When addressing this problem like all the others in this chapter, calm open discussion without emotionally charged words is key to the resolution. If your attitude is one of learning, willing to make improvements, and willing to go the extra mile then you should be successful. If your attitude is fueled by resentment, blame, or anger, your chances for success are going to be very limited.

THE BOSS MAKES DECISIONS WITHOUT CONSULTING ME

Many times a boss will take action and make decisions in order to get things moving or break a dead-lock situation. The boss views this as a necessary part of the job to get things rolling again and on track. However, the employee may consider this meddling with their work and even feel insulted when they are not involved in the decision process.

This should be an easy one to fix unless you are the problem that the boss is trying to change. Simply sit down with your boss and discuss how you feel left out when he or she makes decisions about your work without being involved. Discuss how you feel disappointed and you feel as though your opinions are not valued. Simply letting the boss know you want to be consulted, or be involved in any of the decisions that involve your work, should rectify the situation.

INFLUENCING YOUR BOSS

If your boss is driving you crazy, then you need to make changes in your approach to dealing with the boss. Most likely your boss is not going to change his or her behavior for you. He or she is set in their ways and it is up to you to change your style or behavior if you want to be successful.

► **Career Tip.** Learning to control your boss and his or her perceptions about you is an essential ingredient for career success.

Remember the laws of physics and Brownian motion. Left alone, matter will randomly move about, tend to settle into an equilibrium state, and you can never really tell where matter is at any given moment.

Translating into career terms, your boss will randomly move about, things tend to settle into an equilibrium state defined by the boss and you can never really tell where your boss' head is at any given moment.

The obvious paradigm to this chapter is that you need to do a better job of influencing your boss. The best and most professional means of changing things is to simply sit down with your boss in a calm and professional manner, without a lot of emotion, staying away from blame, and discuss the things you can both do to improve the situation. Make sure you identify the things bothering you in a non-threatening manner and also hear the boss' side of the story. Maybe you are driving your boss nuts without realizing it?

Dealing with your boss on these difficult issues can be very nerve-racking and emotionally upsetting as well as very frustrating. Work force violence is on the rise and is not necessary. Please, if you feel you are losing control, you should remove yourself from the situation immediately and take the time to compose yourself and calm down. If necessary, seek professional counseling.

SUMMARY

Effective communication with the boss is best. The most professional thing you can do is simply have a talk about the things bothering you. In most cases, this can quickly solve the problem.

When you talk with your boss, you can set up the situation for success by getting your boss away from their office. Meet at some neutral place like the cafeteria or a conference room. Some place quiet and peaceful where you can both talk openly and yet not be afraid of being overheard by other employees.

If meeting with the boss does not change things, then it is up to you to take control of the situation and implement some changes. Making changes in your behavior may be the best way to influence the situation in your favor. One good rule to follow is to always use tact and polite manners when implementing change. Tact and polite manners coupled with the realization of changing behavior will take time and patience.

Have you identified any career actions you want to take as a result of reading this chapter? If so, please make sure to capture these ideas before you forget by recording them in the notes section at the back of the book.

ASSIGNMENTS AND DISCUSSION TOPICS

- 1 What is the best action to take if you are having problems with your boss?
- 2 How do you control a boss who is constantly re-prioritizing your work?
- 3 How can you influence your boss if you are bothered by their micro-management?
- 4 If your boss will not change is quitting the job the only answer?

REFERENCES

1. Willis, Gerri, "Dealing with an Abusive Boss," CNNMoney.com, http://moneycnncom/2004/10/15/pf/saving/willis_tips/indexhtm.
2. "How to Deal with a Difficult Boss," http://wwwbadbossologycom/book_menu. (Books on the subject).
3. Weinstein, Bob, *I Hate My Boss!: How to Survive and Get Ahead When Your Boss is A Tyrant, Control Freak, or Just Plain Nuts!*, McGraw-Hill, 1997.
4. Lubit, Roy H., *Coping with Toxic Managers, Subordinates . . . and Other Difficult People: Using Emotional Intelligence to Survive and Prosper*, Financial Times Prentice Hall Books, 2003.