

# BOSS TROUBLE? TAKE CHARGE

Is your manager a terror? Before you think about quitting, try standing up for yourself, make a work buddy, and exercise regularly

By SHWETA TANEJA

Every morning, you are filled with dread—you don't want to go to office and face your boss, who is critical of your work, disorganized, impulsive, disoriented, and has anger management issues. Basically, he's a boss from hell. And this can take a toll.

Sharmila Banwat, consultant psychologist at the Nanavati Super Speciality Hospital in Mumbai, says, "It is the work atmosphere rather than workload which correlates highly to workplace depression." Bad managers, she adds, can lead to stress disorders, anxiety, panic attacks, even substance abuse in some cases. A study published in February in the *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing* says workplace bullying can lead to mental distress and illness.

So if you are dealing with a boss who makes the lives of the characters Nick, Kurt and Dale in the movie *Horrible Bosses* seem like a breeze, then read on and see how you can manage the situation.



## Is my boss really that bad?

A study published in the *Human Research Development Review* in January 2015, researchers at the University of Louisville in the US defined dysfunctional bosses through a graph. Low dysfunction behaviours included rudeness, unrealistic or high expectations, or taking credit for your work. Highly dysfunctional bosses, says the study, are derisive, deceptive, inappropriately assign blame, yell at you, coerce, threaten, publicly scorn or denigrate you, or opt for constructive criticism. All this can lead to psychological issues, ranging from annoyance to trauma.

"An unhelpful boss will define the problem and not coach you for a solution, will be critical, not recognize your efforts, and won't respect your time or work life, and none would generate a lot of stress in your job," says Achal Bhagat, senior consultant, psychiatry at the Indraprastha Apollo Hospital in New Delhi. Some indicators of stress, he says, are lack of interest and motivation, not being proactive about work, unexplained tiredness and fatigue, low self-esteem, unexplained physical symptoms, anxiety, an inability to stop thinking of work issues at home, taking work home, spending time with your family or on your life goals, and bickering and arguing with loved ones.

As soon as you label the person in question a "bad boss", however, you take away your power to change the situation. So, if you find yourself in this situation, take charge.

## Accept it

The first step in dealing with a bad work situation is to accept it and keep working hard, suggests Samir Parikh, director, mental health and behavioural sciences, at Fortis Healthcare in New Delhi. Slacking or letting the quality of work deteriorate because the boss is not good to you is not going to help.

"Keep your focus, clarity and commitment to take responsibility for your own success, regardless of the difficult personalities you may have to encounter throughout your work life," says Banwat.

## Stand up for yourself

Does your boss bully, ridicule or belittle you in front of people? Instead of taking it quietly, face him. A study published by the Ohio State University in the *Personnel Psychology* journal in January 2015 suggested that workers who stand up for themselves after they have been treated badly feel better about their jobs. "If your boss is hostile, there appear to be benefits to reciprocating," says Bennett Tepper, lead author of the study and professor of management and human resources at the university, in a press release. "Employees felt better about themselves because they didn't just sit back and take the abuse," Prof. Tepper adds.

Remember, we are all equal at the workplace, we all perform specific roles and no one does any favour to anyone, adds Dr Bhagat.

## Don't bite back

You can stand up for yourself if bullied, but don't get nasty, try to get even or look for revenge. It will only add to your misery. "If your communication with your boss is not helpful, ask them for their time and give them feedback," says Dr Bhagat. "Give positive feedback about things that are helpful and give negative feedback for things that are unhelpful. Be respectful and non-arrogant. Be precise and do not generalize your negative feedback. Clearly say what your expectations are and request an open discussion on these expectations," adds Dr Bhagat.

## Find out what drives your boss

Why is he being so nasty? Is it his personal



**Bossing around:** Kevin Spacey (top, left) and Jennifer Aniston (above, right) play cruel managers in the film *Horrible Bosses*.

goals, ambitions or frustrations? Or is it the fact that he can't handle things not going his way? "When you know what drives your boss, you can frame your opinions and use language in ways that align with their core values, concerns and priorities," says Banwat. This eases workspace tension.

What you need to do is identify your boss' strengths and weaknesses. "If she reaches late for meetings, you fill in the time; if she is disorganized, you help her organize herself. Position yourself to deliver results, manage expectations and avoid loss," she adds.

## Take feedback from colleagues

If you're constantly being criticized and find that your self-esteem has hit rock bottom,

take feedback from everyone—your superiors, peers, juniors, even your boss—suggests Dr Parikh. "Do not individualize the boss feedback or take it personally," he says. Taking feedback from colleagues might help you identify where the problem lies—in you, work or in the attitude of your boss. It also helps to have a work friend or two as a constant positive sounding board.

## Open up to family and friends

If it gets really bad at work, it's time to see comfort from family and friends. "Talk to your spouse or a close friend, vent out your agonies," says Banwat. This will help deal with anxiety and stress. Not talking about it will only lead to a build-up of stress in you.

## Get physical

Physical exercise is a great stress buster. A study conducted by the National University of Singapore, published in the *Occupational Medicine* journal in 2014, found that yoga or any physical activity at work significantly reduces depressive symptoms an anxiety. "Also, do recreational activities over weekends and holidays and socialize well," says Banwat.

## Talk to HR

If the situation is unmanageable, head to the human resource (HR) department and document your experiences with your boss, says Banwat. This should be an immediate step you're being discriminated against on the basis of gender, identity or caste. "It's important that you're aware of your rights and boundaries and ensure that they're not trampled upon," says Dr Parikh.

The last resort, if nothing changes and no action is taken: Change your job.

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