

## **How To Deal with a Difficult Boss**

Donna Brown Hogarty

*Journalist Donna Brown Hogarty makes it clear that if you've ever had a boss, you've had a bad boss in certain respects. Bosses who are particularly bad, she says, can be grouped into five categories, and being able to recognize the kind of bad boss you have is the first step in dealing with discomfort and frustration at work. This article was published in Reader's Digest in 1993.*

1. Harvey Gittler knew his new boss was high-strung—the two had worked together on the factory floor. But Gittler was not prepared for his co-worker's personality change when the man was promoted to plant manager.
2. Just two days later, the boss angrily ordered a standing desk removed because he'd seen a worker leaning on it to look up an order. He routinely dressed down employees at the top of his lungs. At one time or another he threatened to fire almost everyone in the plant. And after employees went home, he searched through the trash cans for evidence of treason.
3. For many workers, Gittler's experience is frighteningly familiar. Millions of Americans have temperamental bosses. In a 1984 Center for Creative Leadership study of corporate executives, nearly 75 percent of the subjects reported having had at least one intolerable boss.
4. "Virtually all bosses are problem bosses, in one way or another," says psychologist Mardy Grothe, co author with Peter Wylies *of Problem Bosses: Who They Are and How to Deal with Them*. The reason, he said, lies in lack of

training. Most bosses were promoted to management because they excelled at earlier jobs—not because they have experience motivating others.

5. Uncertainly economic times worsen the bad-boss syndrome. “There is an acceptance of getting results at any price,” says Stanley Bing, a business executive and author of *Crazy Bosses*. “As a result, the people corporations select to be bosses are the most rigid and demanding, and the least able to roll with the punches.”
6. Bad bosses often have a recognizable *modus operandi*. Harry Levinson, a management psychologist in Waltham, Massachusetts, has catalogued problem bosses, from the bully to the jellyfish to the disapproving perfectionist. If you’re suffering from a bad boss, chances are he or she combines several of these traits and can be dealt with effectively if you use the right strategy.

### The Bully

7. During his first week on the job, a new account manager at a small Pennsylvania advertising agency agreed to return some materials to a client. When he mentioned this at a staff meeting, the boss turned beet red, his lips began to quiver and he shouted that the new employee should call his client and confess he didn’t know anything about the advertising business, and would *not* be returning the materials.
8. Over the next few months, as the account manager watched the co-workers cower under the boss’s browbeating, he realized that the tyrant fed on fear. Employees who tried hardest to avoid his ire were most likely to catch it. “He

was like a schoolyard bully,” the manager recalls, “and I’ve known since childhood that, when confronted, most bullies back down.”

9. Armed with the new-found confidence and growing knowledge of the ad business, he matched his boss’s behavior. “If he raised his voice, I’d raise mine,” the manager recalls. True to type, the boss started to treat him with grudging respect. Eventually, the young man moved up the ranks and was rarely subjected to his boss’s outbursts.
10. Although standing up to the bully often works, it *could* make matters worse. Mardy Grothe recommends a different strategy: reasoning with him after he’s calmed down. “Some bosses have had a problem with temper control their whole lives, and are not pleased with this aspect of their personality,” he explains. Want a litmus test? If the boss attempts to compensate for his outburst by overreacting and trying to “make nice” the next day, says Grothe, he or she feels guilty about yesterday’s bad behavior.
11. Grothe suggests explaining to your boss how his temper affects you. For instance, you might say, “I know you’re trying to improve my performance, but yelling makes me less productive because it upsets me.”
12. Whatever strategy you choose, deal with the bully as soon as possible, because “once a dominant / subservient relationship is established, it becomes difficult to loosen,” warns industrial psychologist James Fisher. Fisher also suggests confronting your boss behind closed doors whenever possible, to avoid being disrespectful. If your boss continues to be overbearing, try these strategies from psychologist Leonard Felder, author of *Does Someone at Work Treat You Badly?*

13. • To keep your composure while the boss is screaming, repeat a calming phrase to yourself, such as “Ignore the anger. It isn’t yours.”
14. • Focus on a humorous aspect of your boss’s appearance. If she’s got a double chin, watch her flesh shake while she’s yammering. “By realizing that even the most intimidating people are vulnerable, you can more easily relax,” explains Felder.
15. • Wait for your boss to take a breath, then try this comeback line: “I want to hear what you’re saying. You’ve got to slow down.”
16. Finally, never relax with an abusive boss, no matter how charming he or she can be, says Stanley Bing. “The bully will worm his or her way into your heart as a way of positioning your face under his foot.”

### The Workaholic

17. “Some bosses don’t know the difference between work and play,” says Nancy Ahlrichs, vice president of client services at the Indianapolis office of Right Associates, an international outplacement firm. “If you want to reach them at night or on a Saturday, just call the office.” Worse, such a boss invades your every waking hour, making it all but impossible to separate your own home life from the office.
18. Ahlrichs advises setting limits on your availability. Make sure the boss knows you can be reached in crisis, but as a matter of practice go home at a set time. If he responds angrily, reassure him that you will tackle any project first thing in

the morning. Get him to set the priorities, so you can decide which tasks can wait.

19. If you have good rapport with the boss, says Mardy Grothe, consider discussing the problem openly. Your goal is to convince him that just as he needs to meet deadlines, you have personal responsibilities that are equally important.

### The Jellyfish

20. “My boss hires people with the assumption that we all know our jobs,” says a woman who works for a small firm in New England. “Unfortunately, he hates conflict. If someone makes a mistake, we have to tiptoe around instead of moving to correct it, so we don’t hurt anyone’s feelings.”
21. Her boss is a jellyfish. He had refused to establish even a basic pecking order in his office. As a result, a secretary sat on important correspondence for over a month, risking a client’s tax write-offs. Because no one supervises the firm’s support staff, the secretary never received a reprimand, and nobody was able to prevent such mishaps from recurring. The jellyfish simply can’t take charge because he’s afraid of creating conflicts.
22. So “*you* must take charge,” suggests Lee Colby, a Minneapolis-based management consultant. “Tell the jellyfish: ‘This is what I think I ought to be doing. What do you think?’ You are taking the first step, without stepping on your boss’s toes.”

23. Building an indecisive supervisor's confidence is another good strategy. For example, if you can supply hard facts and figures, you can then use them to justify any course you recommend—and gently ease the jellyfish into taking a firmer position.

### The Perfectionist

24. When Nancy Ahlrichs was fresh out of college, she landed her first full-time job, supervising the advertising design and layout of a small-town newspaper. On deadline day, the paper's irritable general manager would suddenly appear over her shoulder, inspecting her work for errors. Then he'd ask a barrage of questions, ending with the one Ahlrichs dreaded most: "Are you sure you'll make deadline?"
25. "I never missed a single deadline," Ahlrichs says, "yet every week he'd ask that same question. I felt belittled by his lack of confidence in me."
26. Ironically, the general manager was lowering the staff's productivity. To paraphrase Voltaire, the perfect is the enemy of the good. According to psychiatrist Allan Mallinger, co-author with Jeannette DeWyze of *Too Perfect: When Being in Control Gets Out of Control*, "The perfectionist's overconcern for thoroughness slows down everyone's work. When everything has to be done perfectly, tasks loom larger." The nit-picking boss who is behind schedule becomes even more difficult, making subordinates ever more miserable.
27. "Remember," says Leonard Felder, "the perfectionist *needs* to find something to worry about." To improve your lot with a perfectionist boss, get her to focus

on the big picture. If she demands you redo a task you've just completed, mention your other assignments, and ask her to prioritize. Often, a boss will let the work you've completed stand—especially when she realizes another project may be put on hold. If your boss is nervous about a particular project, offer regular reports. By keeping the perfectionist posted, you might circumvent constant supervision.

28. Finally, protect yourself emotionally. “You can’t depend on the perfectionist for encouragement,” says Mallinger. “You owe it to yourself to get a second opinion of your work by asking others.”

#### The Aloof Boss

29. When Gene Bergoffen, now CEO of the National Private Truck Council, worked for another trade association and asked to be included in the decision-making process, his boss was brusque and inattentive. The boss made decisions alone, and very quickly. “We used to call him ‘Ready, Fire, Aim,’” says Bergoffen.
30. Many workers feel frozen out by their boss in subtle ways. Perhaps he doesn’t invite them to key meetings or he might never be available to discuss projects. “At the core of every good boss is the ability to communicate expectations clearly,” says Gerard Roche, chairman of Heidrick & Struggles, an executive search firm. “Employees should never have to wonder what’s on a boss’s mind.”

31. If your boss fails to give you direction, Roche says, “the worst thing you can do is nothing. Determine the best course of action, then say to your boss: ‘Unless I hear otherwise, here’s what I’m going to do.’”
32. Other strategies: When your boss does not invite you to meetings or include you in decision making, speak up. “Tell her you have information that might prove to be valuable,” suggests Lee Colby. If that approach doesn’t work, find an intermediary who respects your work and can persuade the boss to listen to your views.
33. To understand your boss’s inability to communicate, it’s vital to examine his work style. “Some like hard data, logically arranged in writing,” says Colby. “Others prefer face-to-face meetings. Find out what makes your boss tick—and speak in his or her language.”
34. Understanding your boss can make your job more bearable in a number of ways. For instance, try offering the boss two solutions to a problem—one that will make him happy, and one that will allow you to reach your goals. Even the most difficult boss will usually allow you to solve problems in your own way—as long as he’s convinced of your loyalty to him.
35. No matter which type of bad boss you have, think twice before going over his head. Try forming a committee with your colleagues and approaching the boss all together. The difficult boss is usually unaware of the problem and is often eager to make amends.

36. Before embarking on any course of action, engage in some self-analysis.  
Chances are, no matter how difficult your job is, you are also contributing to the conflict. “Talk to people who know you both, and get some honest feedback,” suggests Mardy Grothe. “If you can fix the ways in which you’re contributing to the problem, you’ll be more likely to get your boss to change.”
37. Even if you can’t, there’s a silver lining: the worst bosses often have the most to teach you. Bullies, for example, are frequently masters at reaching difficult goals. Perfectionists can often prod you into exceeding your own expectations.
38. As a young resident psychologist at the Menninger psychiatric hospital in Topeka, Kansas, Harry Levinson was initially overwhelmed by the high standards of founder Karl Menninger. “I felt I was never going to be able to diagnose patients as well as he did or perform to such high academic requirement,” Levinson recalls. He even considered quitting. But in the end, he rose to the challenge, and today he believes he owes much of his success to what he learned during that difficult period.
39. Dealing with a difficult boss forces you to set priorities, to overcome fears, to stay calm under the gun, and to negotiate for better working conditions. And the skills you sharpen to ease a tense relationship will stand you in good stead throughout your career. “Employees who are able to survive a trying boss often earn the respect of higher-ups for their ability to manage a situation,” says Levinson. “And because a difficult boss can cause rapid turnover, those who stick it out often advance quickly.”

40. Your bad boss can also teach you what *not* to do with subordinates as you move up—and one day enable you to be a better boss yourself.