

## You Think Your Boss Is Bad?

Some Managers Can't Manage. What to Do If You've Got a Boss Who Only Makes Things Worse.

By Tara Swords  
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Maybe your co-workers are friendly and caring. Maybe your company's mission stirs your passions. Maybe you bring home a fat paycheck for a predictable 40 hours a week. Still, it can take just one sour ingredient to turn your occupational utopia into a recurring nightmare: a jerk for a boss.

Bad bosses run the gamut from meek and uninspiring to unethical and even psychologically abusive. But all bad bosses have one thing in common, says Steve Miranda of the Alexandria-based [Society for Human Resource Management](#).

"Bad bosses are energy vampires," he says. "When employees interact with them, they literally come away from that interaction feeling more drained, worse and less energized."

The No. 1 reason people leave jobs is because they work for bosses they don't respect and who don't inspire employees to reach their potential, says Miranda, who serves as chief human resource, strategic planning and diversity officer for the society.

For most people, job success partly defines self-worth. So a boss who disparages instead of encourages not only damages productivity, Miranda says, but also casts a long, dark shadow on morale.

"A friend of mine called it the shame spiral," says Katy, a 36-year-old Rockville resident who found herself in a work environment she describes as filled with interoffice affairs, racist comments and other inappropriate behavior, often condoned, if not spearheaded, by the boss. "You start thinking, 'I must have done something. How is this happening to me?'"

We asked four people to share their experiences with bad bosses. We have identified them by their first names only so that they could speak freely about the problems they faced.

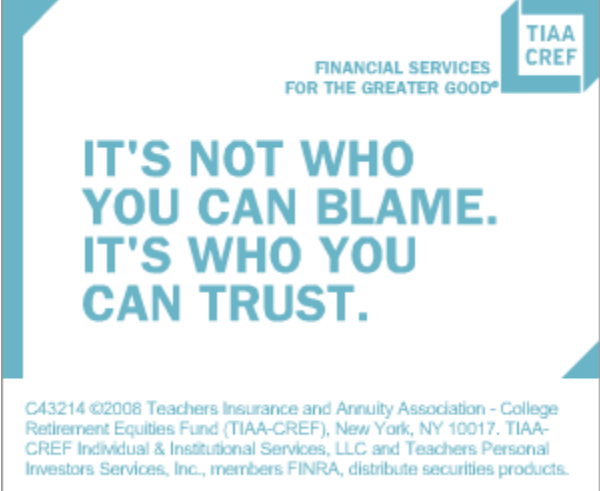
Some of these situations took place several years ago, but the memories are still painful. Nevertheless, the four agreed to dredge up their recollections in hopes that others might find some nugget of wisdom about dealing with their own energy vampires -- and how to know when it's time to cut and run from a jerk.

### The Boss's Way or the Highway

Maybe the boss isn't Dr. Evil, but he does want an army of Mini-Mes. He wants things done his way, and he doesn't trust employees to do it their way.

"Some people are great at delegating details but not authority," says Mo Fathelbab, president of

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Alexandria-based Forum Resources Network and author of "Forum: The Secret Advantage of Successful Leaders." Letting go of authority and trusting employees, Fathelbab says, is a big challenge because the boss is no longer in control. "And when they're not in control, they're not comfortable in their own skin."

When Tammy took a public relations job at a D.C. hospitality business, she tried to be proactive by suggesting fresh ideas. But the boss criticized her way of working, yelled at her, accused her of negativity and faulted her for her 8-to-6 schedule.

"He was nitpicking every single thing I was doing," says Tammy, who's now 39 and lives in Alexandria. She knew he clearly wanted things done his way, but he was also vague about what his way entailed. She tried consulting with him. "I went back and said, 'I just want to make sure I have this right.' But if I didn't, that would fire him up."

Eventually, Tammy's boss put her on probation. He gave her three months to fix the problems, but Tammy says he never made clear what those problems were. She felt blindsided.

"In every position I've ever had, I've always had a great relationship with [bosses]," Tammy says. "I've always received accolades from the people I've worked with and for."

Tammy says she could have enlisted the help of human resources but feared being blacklisted or seen as a complainer. Her health bore the brunt of her stress.

"It had gotten to a point that I couldn't even brush my teeth in the morning without gagging," she says. "I have never been that upset about going into work ever before. I ended up losing 17 pounds, and I'm not a very big person to begin with."

Tammy thought her personality didn't jell with her boss's more aggressive style. In these situations, Miranda recommends that employees ask the HR department to administer personality profiling tests such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or the Predictive Index.

"Things come to the surface" in these tests, Miranda says. "Employees and the boss look at each other and say, 'Oh, that's why we're having this problem.' What starts off as an adversarial relationship moves into something more positive."

Tammy was interviewing for new jobs when her boss moved to a different city. Her probation ended, and she got a new manager who trusts her to do her job well -- and she has thrived at the company ever since.

"The sky opened up. Things got clear again," Tammy says. "I love what I do."

### **Inappropriate to the Extreme**

On TV's "The Office," boss [Michael Scott](#) is an endless source of outrageously inappropriate comments and behavior. The character is funny and sometimes even lovable. But in real life, such a boss can alienate employees and create a toxic environment.

When Katy, the Rockville resident, took a job planning events for a D.C.-based nonprofit organization, she joined a tiny department with an established culture in which nothing seemed off-limits. Katy remembers hearing the boss fight with her husband on the phone -- the same boss who she says was

having a romantic affair with a co-worker.

Katy was uncomfortable because her boss condoned an environment in which racist and sexual comments were acceptable, but the only person Katy felt she could approach for help had been sexually involved with the boss.

If there's any hope of resolving this sort of problem, it's best done with classic "I" phrases, Miranda says. Don't accuse the boss of bad behavior, but say how the behavior makes you feel. The boss will either apologize or be indifferent to your concern, at which point you'll know how to proceed.

"Some people are more than willing to change," Miranda says. "Other people, quite frankly, are jerks. And employees need to vote with their feet."

Katy says she took suggestions for improving the workplace to her boss but nothing changed. She ultimately filed a grievance and hired a lawyer after her boss falsified performance-related information in Katy's file. She began documenting her boss's actions in hopes of getting the boss reprimanded, or at least getting herself transferred, but she only felt worse.

"I had migraines. I felt sick to my stomach," Katy says. "I used all of my sick leave just because it was so horrible."

In the end, she did vote with her feet and resigned before her grievance was resolved.

"It was so bad that I left before I vested in the pension," she says. "It was worth it to leave and give up that money rather than stay and be around those people."

### **The Silent Treatment**

When Dawn took a job with an Alexandria nonprofit group in 1991, she was a recent college graduate eager to build a career in communications. She loved the organization's mission and had completed a successful project there as a consultant. The environment fostered discipline and teamwork, and Dawn had a good working relationship with the boss. But when Dawn became an employee, the boss's behavior changed.

"It became a command-and-control environment," says Dawn, who now lives in San Francisco. The boss "was constantly over my shoulder. She'd occasionally listen to my phone calls. I was forbidden from having conversations with board members. I was seeing a dynamic that was really counterproductive to the organization."

Dawn says she thought the boss had confidence in her abilities, which made the dynamic all the more confusing. And, eventually, there was no hope of clearing up the confusion after the boss stopped communicating altogether.

"I'd come in the office, and she wouldn't even look up," Dawn says. "In a small office with only three people, it's a little awkward."

Fathelbab says the situation reminds him of a place where he worked years ago. "This was the boss's style of saying, 'I'm going to punish you, but I can't do it verbally.'" In such cases, he says, it's critical to restart the communication. A 360-degree evaluation system, in which everyone reviews the people they work with and for, can uncover the problem and get people talking about how to solve it.

For Dawn, the lack of communication reached a head one day when she borrowed a friend's car to drive to work and her boss had it towed from the company lot. "As opposed to walking in the office and just asking, 'Is that anybody's car?' she made a decision to call a tow truck and have the car removed," Dawn says. "Hours later she said, 'I didn't know that was yours.' She offered no recourse, no reimbursement, no help to drive me down to get it."

At review time, Dawn and her boss agreed on the need to communicate better. But Dawn felt they were going through the motions.

Dawn eventually moved on with a valuable lesson: how not to behave as a manager.

"I knew I didn't want to be anything like that person," she says. "When you're young, sometimes you can get caught up in insecurities trying to please your boss. But when I feel a little insecure or feel paranoia creeping in, I address that internally rather than project that on anybody else."

Since that job, Dawn has managed many people and worked in companies of varying sizes. She says she learned from that early experience that it's helpful to address problems immediately. But it was a hard-won lesson.

"It's so funny: As I start to remember this stuff, I get the same anxious feeling I had," Dawn says. "I internalized so much."

### **Bullying and Intimidation**

When Bethesda resident Tash took a job at a grocery store deli in her native Australia, she was just 17. She and her boss had agreed that she would work 12 hours each week. But the boss soon pressured her to take on more shifts, often with only a few hours' notice.

"She would say that if I didn't come do this shift, she would cancel everything I had that week," says Tash, now 22. "I was in high school, and I wasn't as self-assured as I should have been, and she probably capitalized on that."

Tash eventually decided to assert herself, with some success. The boss gave her fewer hours but didn't cancel all of her shifts as threatened. Tash belonged to a union and today says she thinks it might have helped to bring the situation to the union's attention.

"I was too scared to talk to anyone," she says. "I think you get paid less, so people assume they can treat you badly -- or you assume they can treat you badly."

Fathelbab says standing up for yourself can be scary but worth it.

"The bullying personality will keep bullying until at some point in time you stand up and say, 'I'm not going to take it anymore,'" Fathelbab says. "It might work. It might not work, and that means you might have a better future somewhere else."

Ultimately, enough people complained about the boss that she was transferred to a different location. "After that, it kind of made the whole staff feel unified," Tash says.

### **Be Fair, Then Firm**

Experts say it's good to remember that today's managers have a lot of responsibilities: increasing revenue, keeping customers happy, managing a diverse workforce that comprises four generations of people who are motivated and fulfilled differently. A little empathy for the boss can't hurt.

But when you conjure up all of your objectivity and empathy and still think the boss is in the wrong -- and your attempts at resolution are fruitless -- it's time to go.

"If you have a mediator, go to them," Katy says. "Try, but realize that it's not always going to work."

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