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How To Handle A Difficult Boss



Caroline Castrillon Contributor

Careers

I write about career, entrepreneurship and women's advancement.

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There are ways to find common ground with a difficult boss. GETTY

Do you ever feel like Nick and Kurt in the movie, *Horrible Bosses*? While your manager may not force you to drink 18-year-old scotch at 8 am or fire "fat people," they may be difficult in other ways. Perhaps they bully subordinates, micromanage or take your ideas and pass them off to senior management as their own. Or maybe they are just merely incompetent. Regardless of the circumstances, [dealing with a difficult boss](#) isn't easy, especially in today's world of remote work. Fortunately, quitting isn't always the answer. There are ways to find common ground and build a healthy working relationship.

According to Dr. Sherri Malouf, author of *Science and the Leader-Follower Relationship*, there is a science behind whether managers and direct reports get along. Malouf identified seven *Implicit Social Elements*—what she calls the building blocks of relationships. They are unconscious and play out one way or another in all leader-follower relationships.

Here are some practical recommendations for dealing with a difficult boss:

Establish Trust

Common sense tells us that when there is more trust, there is a stronger relationship. [One study](#) revealed that oxytocin is released by the brain when a signal of trust is received, leading to increased cooperation. [Research also supports](#) that trust is built through acts of reciprocity. Being trusted—or feeling that requests are fulfilled without threats to gain compliance—activates the brain's reward region.



Malouf's suggestions for building trust with a difficult boss include:

- Try to be genuine and authentic.
- Trust that your boss will attempt to do the right thing.
- If trust is damaged, look for ways to repair it.

Create Fairness

Fairness refers to the impartial and just treatment of others. It can mean different things to different people.

A few ideas to create a sense of fairness include:

- Suggest to your manager that the team discuss what it means to be treated fairly.
- If you feel that you haven't been treated fairly, talk to your manager and explain why.
- Also, be fair with your boss and give them the benefit of the doubt.

Practice Self-Control

Self-control enables both leaders and direct reports to process strong emotions productively. It's essential to become neutral about your difficult boss because reacting (even just internally) weakens you. By actively managing our feelings, we can achieve a calm and powerful presence, which helps create successful outcomes.

Malouf offers these tips for practicing self-control around a difficult boss:

- Don't be afraid to show what you are passionate about but don't go over the top.
- If your manager is upset, use active listening to help them calm down.
- Manage your thoughts and emotions. Don't get angry or raise your voice.

Build Empathy

Empathy is the awareness, understanding, and sharing of another's feelings. It is the idea of being able to "walk in someone else's shoes"—letting go of our own needs, beliefs, and judgments so that we can be open to someone else's perception of reality. Malouf suggests booking some time to get to know your boss. Ask open-ended questions and make sure you understand why your boss thinks the way they do.

Here are some additional ways to build empathy when you're dealing with a difficult boss:

- Be kind, genuine, and caring. Value your manager's opinions, needs, ideas, and feelings.
- Pay attention to what your leader is feeling as well as what they are saying.
- Notice when your boss is having trouble and take the time to understand the situation before making any suggestions.

Develop Reciprocity

Reciprocity is the exchange of favors, acts of kindness, gifts, and more. [A recent study](#) actually refers to reciprocity as a central feature of human nature that creates social stability.

Malouf offers these tips to build reciprocity with your manager:

- Say positive things about your difficult boss to other people in the organization.
- Give your boss the benefit of the doubt. They believe in you, so you should believe in them.
- If your boss is trying to implement a new procedure, policy, or practice, encourage and help by being open, supportive, and creative.

Increase Status

Malouf describes status as “measured by how much an individual feels accepted by others, as well as his or her place or position in the group. Status is the element that makes us sensitive to hierarchy and our place in it.”

Some ways to increase status with your manager include:

- Believe in yourself.
- Listen to and accept feedback. Then act on the feedback to better yourself.
- Do things for the greater good of the team. Be generous with your time.

Foster Mutual Respect

What Malouf terms “mutual recognition respect” means valuing another person simply because they are human beings. This concept focuses on human worth as opposed to an assessment of capabilities. “Find a peer or someone who has a good relationship with your boss,” suggests Malouf. “Ask them for advice on what you can do differently. Get another person’s perspective on not only what you’re doing that could be causing problems with the relationship, but also what they’re doing to build a strong relationship with your boss.”

You can also build mutual respect with your difficult boss by following this advice:

- Don’t talk over, interrupt, or argue with them.
- Don’t talk about them behind their backs.
- Accept that they are doing the best that they can, given who they are.

The important thing to remember is that relationships are a two-way street. By meeting your manager halfway, you’ll increase your chances of building a lasting personal and professional relationship.

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