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# "Fat, drunk and stupid is no way to go through life, Son"

## How to Deal with a Negative Boss

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If you are familiar with the 1978 movie *Animal House*, you will recognize the title as the famous quote from Dean Wormer directed at Delta House freshman Kent Dorfman after he achieved a 0.2 grade point average. I was reminded of this quote a few years ago when a former colleague mentioned that his boss had suggested that he seriously consider eating better and starting an exercise program. Aside from thinking that this statement was politically incorrect for a boss to say to an employee, the statement also surprised me because I didn't see my colleague as a person who was obese or out of shape.

It occurred to me that perhaps his boss was genuinely concerned about my colleague's well being. I am of the opinion that most of us could make better choices to lead healthier lives. However, my former colleague told me that I was missing the point. He said that this was just another example of the continual negativity he had to put up with from his boss. It seemed that his boss never said a nice word and never praised anyone for doing a good job. When he told his fellow employees what the boss said, they all agreed that the boss had outdone himself once again.

Why do some bosses believe that berating their employees is a good management practice? Why do some bosses fail to ever praise their employees? It is hard to pinpoint the exact reasons, but it is likely that they were either not trained properly to manage people or they lack the aptitude. Unfortunately for us, these negative bosses are still out there in the workplace, and given the fact they can still be somewhat successful, they are not going away anytime soon.

One of the problems with berating employees is that it usually does not lead to a good outcome. I don't see employees returning to their desks afterwards with the mindset of improving their performance. Rather, an employee is more likely to be defensive, resentful and may even say something that he or she might regret. It doesn't help bring out the best in the

employees, which should be every manager's goal. Have you ever seen a successful team that had a negative manager? Craving affirmation is a basic and critical human need. A team that has a positive and effective leader is much more successful because the employees feel good about themselves and their jobs. They are motivated to perform better. They stick around. A recent Gallup poll showed that only 22 percent of workers leave a job solely for benefits and pay.

It is unfortunate that in today's economic environment where the majority of employees are just happy to have a job, negative managers can operate with less consequence. In a recent survey conducted by Opinion Research Corporation, 80 percent of respondents said they would consider leaving their current job if presented with other opportunities. One of the major reasons why employees leave companies is leadership or lack thereof. Therefore, I believe that companies that have not addressed the issue of negative bosses will likely lose their top talent as the economy improves. What if you can't wait for the economy to improve? What if you have a negative boss now and you want to know how to deal with her? The following are some steps that you should consider.

### 1. Keep Your Distance

While it may be difficult given that this person is your boss, you should try as much as you can to limit your contact with him. Refrain from chitchat or discussing anything personal, as it just provides your boss additional material and opportunities for abuse. Consider using email with your boss more frequently so you can communicate more efficiently. It also creates a trail of your interactions and work performance. The hope is that through this trail, your company's management can more easily see who the problem is once they realize a change is needed. However, don't completely retreat to emails because this could lead to misunderstandings. If you sense any misunderstanding involving the email exchange, a phone conversation or face to face to straighten it out will be needed as quickly as possible.

## 2. Don't Let Your Boss Push Your Hot Buttons

In Dale Carnegie's book *How To Win Friends And Influence People*, he says that the only way to get the best of an argument is to avoid it. Don't let your boss rattle you. Remember that while you can't control your boss's behavior, you can control your response to it. Getting angry or defensive is not likely to help. Try to be polite and courteous at all times. This doesn't mean you shouldn't try to give a shot at honest feedback if pushed, but it may not help as his behavior could be ingrained. However, it is possible that your calm and rational manner could frustrate your boss and send him looking for another victim.

## 3. Don't Perpetuate Negativity

You don't want to let the ripples of negativity invade your life. I strongly suggest that you refrain from discussing the problems with your boss with your other co-workers, family or friends. You will know that you have crossed this line if you find that your family and friends start asking you, "Is work any better?" or "How is that lousy boss of yours?". If this is the case, you have succeeded in proselytizing for your boss and spreading his message of negativity.

A friend of mine told me about a call he received from his son's teacher. The class was asked to put together a Christmas wish list and his son had "firing my Daddy's boss" on his list. You don't want to let this person have that kind of impact in your life. You also want to demonstrate to your co-workers and your management that you are able to rise above the situation. Don't become the collateral damage from your boss's negativity.

## 4. Try to Get Known by Others

You put yourself at risk if your negative boss is the only one providing feedback about your performance to others at your company. If you have observed her criticizing your co-workers behind their backs, what is to say that she is not doing the same thing when you are not around? Whether or not she is improperly representing your



performance, it is important for you to be your own advocate in this area. I recommend getting involved with committees within your company so you can showcase your talents to others in your organization. You may also want to get involved with outside organizations such as Toastmasters where you can network and improve your skills. This can keep you grounded and provide the opportunity for career advancement away from your negative boss.

## 5. Wait Them Out

It is probably naïve to think that management is not aware that your boss's negativity is making him ineffective. Sometimes it is just a matter of time before they decide to terminate or reorganize to address the issue. I remember early in my career when I became aware that a vice president was struggling with the ineffectiveness of a negative boss who was his subordinate. He said that every time this person entered the room, it was like two people leaving. Not only does a negative boss

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not pull his own weight but he also hampers the performance of others.

If you find that you can't wait, you should consider looking for a transfer or another job. Life is too short, and you may come to the realization that this situation is unlikely to lead to any career growth and could also be harmful to your health. Always explain the desire for change as a career development step: *"I like what I am doing but I want to do more."* The truth is that in a more positive environment, you should be able to grow and accomplish more.

I believe that our purpose in life is to create. We build things. We improve things. We make the world a better place. By doing all of these things,

we feel successful and we prosper emotionally (and most times financially as well). A motivational speaker recently told me that they coined a phrase about negative people in Baltimore where he comes from. He said that negative people were like "crabs in a barrel". Just when you make a move to better yourself (get out of the barrel), they grab you with their claws and pull you back in. He warned us that we should be careful who we take up with on this journey.

So if you hear something from your boss that reminds you of the words of Dean Wormer, it is unlikely that the situation can be solved with a toga party like in the movie. You just need to get yourself away from that negative boss. ●