

Incivility: When the boss is the problem

Some bosses are nice, some not so much. If you wish to survive the not-so-nice boss, the first step to staying alive long enough to tell your tale is to accurately distinguish between the abrasive manager (often labelled as the workplace bully) and the seemingly more benign incivil species. Once you reach an accurate diagnosis, you'll face a critical choice: Deal successfully with the situation or repeat the tried-and-true mistakes made by those who walked this path before you.

For help with making the initial diagnosis, I contacted Laura Crawshaw, president of the Boss Whispering Institute in Portland, Ore., which specializes in coaching abrasive managers. According to Crawshaw, abrasive-type managers can be spotted by five typical clusters of behaviour: over-control, threats, public humiliation, blatant condescension and a tendency to overreact in a variety of business and interpersonal situations. The abrasive manager's blatantly aggressive behaviours can cause serious damage to physical and mental health.

But, for now, let's focus on the incivil boss. This species of boss can be spotted in his natural work environment by behaviours such as skipping the basic niceties of human interactions ("hello," "thank you," "please"), discourteous intrusions on your space and time, rude use of his BlackBerry and other technologies, "forgetting" meetings, ignoring emails, withholding information and moodiness.

You'll find these bosses in every sector and organization. Their behaviour provides rich material for colourful stories, perhaps over a good glass of wine, that help take the edge off what tend to be genuinely challenging realities.

Having leveraged your hard-earned life experience, street smarts and sharp analytic skills to reach the right diagnosis, there's a good chance you'll be tempted to fall into some time-honoured traps. Here are the top eight mistakes you may want to make if you wish to embark on a journey into self-induced misery:

Get even. They shot your idea down? Shoot theirs right down too when they're not around to notice. No "hellos?" Ignore



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them right back. If you follow this eye-for-an-eye method, you're certainly validating what researchers have found: Incivility tends to be followed by retaliatory mini-aggression acts that then spiral into increasingly intense aggressive behaviours. And if you compromise your own credibility and productivity in the process, well, so be it.

Nurture your Velcro-like self. Take everything the boss does to heart and run every interaction over and over in your mind. Never let go, forget or forgive. Keep yourself mentally in his business (such as what he does, says or thinks) instead of sticking to your own business — the things you actually happen to have control over.

Chain yourself to your seat. Persuade yourself you have no options, you are not marketable or you'll never find such a generous benefit package elsewhere. This will make you stay in the job long after you should have left.

Get an ulcer. Allow the stress to get to you. Ignore those tight neck and shoulder muscles, the sleepless nights, the weight gain, irritability and pounding headaches. You may also need to go on stress leave if things are bad enough.

Keep mum. Don't speak up, don't ask for change and be fearful of the consequences. Let the situation — and your resentments — continue to fester.

Have an all-out outburst. When you've finally had enough of the situation, give the boss (or someone else in power) a piece of your mind. A highly irritated voice, an angry tone or a victim stance can be particularly useful in leading you nowhere in a

hurry. But, hey, at least you'll have that smug sense you finally stood up for yourself.

Avoid organizational channels that could actually help. Persuade yourself organizational channels that may have the potential to change the situation are going to be totally ineffective in your case. After all, your boss carries so much clout. Continue to stew in your misery and lovingly nurture your victim position.

Spread the news. Rather than speak up directly or use appropriate organizational channels, launch a personal ad campaign. Tell everyone about your suffering and make sure to give both the boss and your company a bad name wherever possible. Good places to do so are movie lineups, social gatherings and, of course, your doctor's waiting room, where you'll be spending lots of time anyway due to recurring stress symptoms.

The above tactics are popular but all lead to dead ends. Instead, my advice for dealing with incivil bosses is probably similar to what your grandmother could have told you: Muster the courage to speak up constructively (the boss is probably not even aware of the impact of the behaviour). Set boundaries, gradually and gracefully. Take good care of yourself because, when all is said and done, you're all you've got. Replace your habitual Velcro with a Teflon-inspired existence, so you can allow things to slide right off you. Remain mentally in your own business rather than meddling in theirs. Remind yourself this is just a job, it does not define you. Try taking the issue to someone who has potential influence because there's a good chance, with a bit of competent coaching, this boss's behaviour can be turned around.

If nothing changes, then it's time to polish off your resumé and find a better workplace where you can safely park your talent, body and soul.

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