

## 5. Dealing With Bad Bosses (& Beating Them For Good)

One of the most frequent questions concerning the workplace is how to handle a bad boss.

It's not an easy question to answer because it's very generic: there are countless different ways one can be "bad".

So this lesson will deal with the problem at a grassroots level. "Bad" means "really bad" and the solutions we'll tackle are final: either finding a way to get along, or finding a way to get rid of him.

### First, Make Sure It's Not You

Never underestimate this part.

Real, deep power starts from within us and with our ability to know, address and fix our own shortcomings.

Begin by asking yourself the following:

#### **Is it a bad boss or is it you**

There is no shame if you are a good chunk of the problem *and* if you are able to recognize it.

What do your colleagues think?

HR, other managers, customers?

What was your relationship with previous bosses? If you disliked the majority of your former bosses, it might be you.

It's not necessarily "you" in a bad way: I also disliked more bosses than I liked.

And it might be because you're a naturally rebellious personality, you love freedom too much or you have very, very high standards for the people around you.

## **Are you sure that your boss has evil intentions?**

Put yourself in his shoes.

Chances are he's not evil. Or at least, no more evil than the average person.

Consider what you have done as well.

And I mean *really* consider the situation objectively and *really* put yourself in his shoes.

When I answer this question honestly, for example, it's impossible for me to deny that in some stints I could not care less about work and I was continuously resisting some bosses' authority.

## **Can you make a bad a boss work**

Even if it's him, why can't you develop a good relationship with a bad boss?

If you can manage to have good relationships with bad people, that's all the more power to you.

Try to change your approach, your mindset, and your feelings and try to make it work: it will be a huge personal conquest and a huge display of social power when you can go from dysfunctional relationship to functional and positive relationship.

## **Can you make a bad boss an ally**

How could you align interests even with someone you dislike?

For example, you might agree that if you reach X or if the company or department reaches X, then you get promoted.

Or you get a huge bonus. Or you work from home. Or whatever. Don't start a fight before you have considered all other options.

## **Is your work weakening?**

No matter your situation, you cannot allow anyone to impact the quality of your work. A bad boss should be a motivation to do more, not less.

## **Do you have a bigger plan?**

If your only plan is to defeat a bad boss, then that's not a great plan. You have little control with that plan. What if the next one is also bad? Getting rid of a bad boss and taking his place is a better one. Or getting rid of him while a replacement you like is in the offing is a better plan.

## **How have you “framed” the situation?**

If you think of yourself as a victim, then you are a victim. Think of this situation as an opportunity to improve your social skills and your mental resilience.

## **What other steps can you take to “contain” him?**

Maybe there are alternative solutions.  
Like taking an assignment abroad or moving team. Or agreeing on strong boundaries and job requirements.  
The best war is the one you don't need to fight.

## **Do you need to increase your leverage?**

The answer to this question is almost always YES.  
Don't start a war when you have less power than your boss because that's the definition of an unwinnable war.

**Recommendation:**

Before declaring your boss an enemy, focus at least one month on improving your relationship while focusing on everything positive you can find about him.

## If Your Performance is Poor

If your performance is poor, you likely don't have the leverage to start a war.

In that case, I recommend you go have a heart-to-heart talk with him.

Tell him you feel things haven't been going well between you two. But you really respect him as a boss and you love your job and you'd love to make your work and relationship good again.

But he needs to be frank with you and tell you what the problem is because you can't fix what you don't know.

If he is not forthcoming, propose some ideas.

Tell him:

***You:** What's the issue from your point of view? Is it X? Is it Y? am I doing poorly here, do I come across as unfriendly or uncooperative? What is it?*

If you can get information on role models and other colleagues that's great so you can get an idea on what type of work he likes and, most important, what type of personality he likes.

***You:** Am I doing really bad?*

*Is that guy doing better than me? In what way?*

This is a great approach if your work is not terrible, because the tendency of the boss at this point is to also tell you about the good stuff.

And when *he* says positive stuff it is immeasurably more powerful than *you* saying you're not doing too bad.

Once you know what the problem is, address that.

Imagine a dialogue like this:

***You:** Am I not coding well enough? I seem to be doing OK with quality control, but maybe not good enough?*

***Him:** Frankly, it's your performance coupled with your attitude*

***You:** (swallowing the urge of fighting his claims) Okay, help me address the performance first, then we go to the attitude. My performance compared to other guys here or in general?*

Etc. etc., the basic idea is that you need to drill down and know exactly what he expects and wants from you.

Such a heart-to-heart conversation, by itself, will be a huge step in helping you mend the relationship.

In some cases, you can move from a bad relationship to a positive one from the very first day you have this conversation.

The rest is simply working on that feedback -and show him you're working on that feedback-.

## What not to do

These are common mistakes people commit when dealing with a bad boss:

### **Talk to him about him being bad**

*Never* talk to your boss with a frame that he is the problem. That is almost sure to create more problems for you.

## **Talk his boss**

As we've already seen management doesn't usually appreciate those who bring them problems.

Only go to the upper level when you have huge leverage to get your boss fired and ideally you also have options outside the company.

Now let's go ahead with what you can do:

## **Legal Assault**

Keep your work behavior spotlessly clean.

And in the meanwhile collect all evidence of inappropriate behavior and misdemeanor from your employer.

It's often much easier than you think as many (most) businesses operate with a gap between the law and the actual day to day business.

## **Speak to an employment lawyer**

You want to know what most companies and employees do wrong, what constitutes evidence, what makes a big difference in court.

## **Be spotless**

An enemy without weaknesses is an invincible enemy by definition.

Don't leave any dirt, and you're unassailable. Don't surf the net on the company's data and devices, be on time, follow SOPs etc.

## **Induce your employer to break the law**

Induce your employer into mistakes.

Schedule a call during holiday and say you are always available during the weekend (*say it*, don't write it!). Whenever your boss contacts you, it's a possible infringement (depending on which country you're in).

Go to doctors every once in a while, say you're stressed and keep the evidence.

## **Befriend everyone**

If anyone is called in as witness they all must say good things about you (there you go: another reason to make lots of friends).

## **Make friends with your boss' enemies**

Keep great relationships with anyone who hates your boss.

Most of all, those who left the company: it's immensely easier to testify against a former employer than a current one.

And any witnesses who can testify against your boss or employer is pure gold

## **Show a carefree attitude**

Always look and sound like a guy who would never go to court.

If anyone mentions anything lawyer-related you reply "life's too short for courts guys".

# **Political Assault**

Here is how to destroy a bad boss politically:

## Turn Colleagues Into Allies

Phil Jackson, the most successful NBA coach and author of “[Eleven Rings](#)” says that one of the biggest challenges of leadership is keeping the guys who hate you away from those who are undecided.

Exactly.

Your job is to spread the virus of hatred across all the ones who are neutral and undecided.

Spread hatred but never look like you’re driving a personal crusade. Drop hints if needed, but make someone else admit first they can’t stand the boos. Then let them vent while you provide the sounding board to their stories.

Remember: if you want to lead this charge you can’t be a victim, so your message is:

***You:** Man, this company/team has such great potential and I love you guys.. It is just a pity that a hole is wasting all our potential*

## Spread Rumors (Without Looking Like You Are)

You want to destroy your boss without looking like you’re trying to.

Be the guy who gives kids firecrackers and tips them on where to find matches.

Leave an inflammatory review on Glassdoor that hints right back at your team -and him-.

When people from other teams ask you how are things, look at them as if you wished you could say the truth, but you can’t.

If *they* mention the rumors, you are succeeding. Look up, exhale as if in pain, then say “well, yeah, since you know already... “.



## **Keep Unhappy People in The Team**

Unhappy employees will want to leave.

High turnover is not bad for you because it reflects badly on your boss. But you got much bigger leverage if you keep the unhappy employees in the team.

Promise them you will soon get rid of the boss and plead them to stay: a living ally is better than a fallen hero.

## **Lower Team's Output**

Now you're in a bind.

If you keep delivering great work you can indirectly help bad boss, while if your team does badly it's easier to get rid of him.

Ideally, you find a way to deliver good work while at the same time the overall team performs badly. If not possible, in doubt, stick to delivering excellent work.

## **Keep Increasing Your Leverage**

Make friends with management, always smile and keep a positive attitude: if you let a bad boss get to you, he wins.

You must be a paragon of greatness.

## **Dealing With A Commanding Boss**

There is nothing wrong with your boss telling you what to do.

But there are ways and ways of asking.

A boss asking you in a friendly tone or asking you if you're free -and you always say yes of course-, that's a boss who's respecting you.

But a boss who puts you down, yells or orders you around as if you were are a puppet, that's disrespectful.

Ideally, you always want to avoid looking like a flunky running left and right.

Here are a few ideas on executing orders without looking like you are a powerless flunky:

**1. Go there happily:** the more you move with a positive mood, the more you make it look like you're not being inconvenienced

**2. Change attitude:** if you're the last in the rung and/or early in your career don't focus on looking powerful (yet). Focus on adding value instead. Be helpful to everyone. And when you're doing stuff for your boss it won't look like you're submitting because you "like" to help.

*Example:* in one of my early stints the guy running to get coffee for everyone and volunteering for the most mundane tasks had more power and was making more money than I did while I was focusing on *looking* powerful.

**3. Check up on them:** if they summon you to them put a hand on their arm as soon as you get there and say "is everything alright?"

**4. Do it on your time:** if it's something that can wait say "thanks for reminding me, I'll get it done in a minute". The busier and the more involved you get in important tasks, the more you can freely use this move

**5. Tell him in your 1:1:** show that you respect him but also ask him to please use a more accommodating communication style when he needs something from you

**6. Pretend it was your choice:** this a great technique you should always use when you cannot say no to a rude order. The technique is this: immediately take ownership of the order. That way it doesn't seem like it was imposed and you align yourself with the powers that be (instead of against it and losing).  
Look at Carbone doing it in Goodfellas:

<https://youtu.be/gCQRvfWvdt8>

Because he immediately becomes the enforcer of that order, he doesn't lose as much status (just watch the scene from the beginning and compare it to the other guy who instead tried to resist power).

## How to Stop Disrespect

When you decide to put a stop to a boss disrespecting you, you must be ready to lose your job if you don't have more power than he has.

And that's where leverage comes into play: the more leverage you have, the harder it will be to let you go and the easier it will be for you to walk away (and win the power showdown).

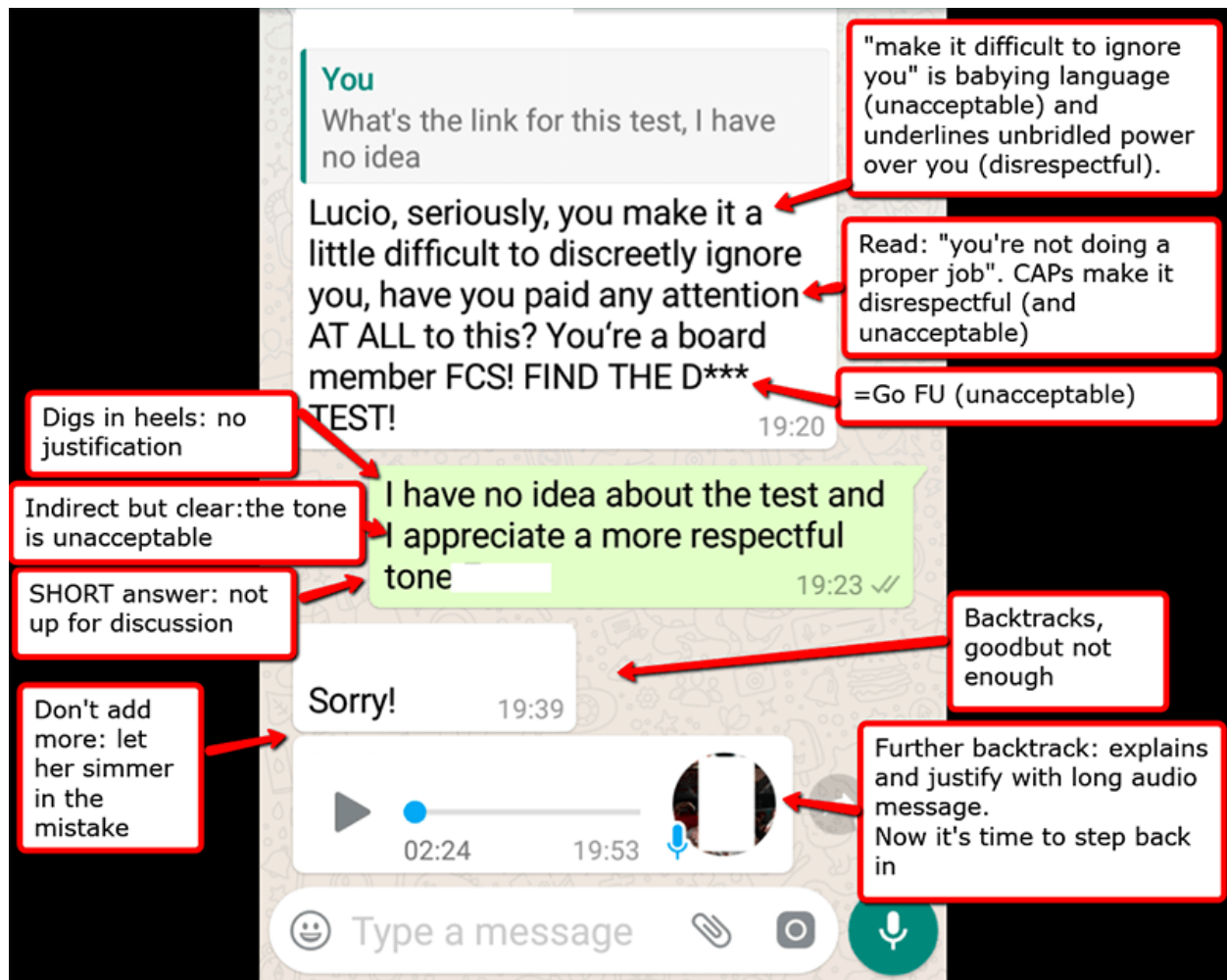
Personally, I would highly recommend you don't let anyone disrespect you on a continuous basis.

Continuous abuse is highly deleterious for your self-esteem, your self-narrative, your future potential and even for your physical health.

### Example of Handling a Disrespectful Boss

This was on a WhatsApp group, which made it all the more important that I take action.

Failing to address public disrespect will discredit you in the eyes of everyone else faster than the speed of light.



In the beginning, I was pondering if I should have taken some more time to reply.

But my decision to act quickly was strategic: I did not want her to backtrack by herself. **She had to backtrack because I asked her to do so.**

If she had asked sorry before I had the chance to intervene I would have still lost a lot of value (remember the first lesson on apologies? An apology, in this case, would have meant that she can disrespect me at will).

Sure, there were ways with which I could have improved the situation, but I was aiming for something better.

I wanted her to apologize *because I demanded it*.  
You should aim for the same.

If you execute such a move well, you will immediately become the second in command in the group -if you weren't already-.  
If it was a bad boss, some other teammates might start looking up to you for protection.  
And in the eyes of some, you will actually become the real leader of the group.

This was, of course, another example of a showdown.

## **Example 2: a gentler way**

I was the guy responsible for all clients in a small fintech startup.  
During a call with one of the customers, the managing director was rather curt towards me.

And the way I work, I can't afford to lose the respect of the people I onboard, sell to and deal with on a daily basis.

As soon as the call was over, I said *exactly* that to the founder. In a calm and respectful way.  
He agreed, profusely apologized and respected me much more after that.

## **The Steps of Dealing With a Boss Yelling at You**

Here are the general steps for dealing with a boss yelling at you:

1. Internalize Aggression Is NEVER OK
2. Internalize Mistakes Are OK

This is an important step because most of us feel guilty after a mistake. When we feel guilty, we also feel like a reprimand is OK and, by extension, we all become more ready to accept and excuse abuse.

But you must believe in your core that abuse is *never* OK.

What's OK instead are mistakes, which are a part and parcel of doing... Pretty much anything.

3. Let Him Yell
4. Keep Proud Nonverbal
5. State You Are Not OK With Yelling
6. Hold Your Own
7. Don't Accept "Sorry But You..."

Some bad bosses will try to feed the narrative that "yes, I exaggerated, but you..."

There is no "but you".

Keep the two events separate. Your mistake is a mistake you are happy to own, talk about, find solutions for and learn from.

But the abusive reaction to the mistake is a different matter that must be dealt with separately.

8. Demand a Public Apology

## Leveraging Your Leverage

If you got leverage, another high risk-high reward technique is to put that leverage right on the line.

As soon as a bad boss comes complaining about some trivial issue, you can say:

**Boss:** look Matt, I heard some complaints about you working with headphones on..

**You:** headphones... ?

**Boss:** yeah, you're often working with your headphones on and it doesn't look very professional

**You:** I disagree, why should it look unprofessional

**Boss:** Well, it does and I am requesting you to stop using them

**You:** boss, I think I am good employee and I'm not doing anything wrong here. I am always happy to remove them and talk to people when I need to. Can we talk about this in private?

**Boss:** Matt, you simply gotta stop using those earphone

**You:** Look, boss, I listen to headphones because it helps me concentrate. If you're not OK with that, it means I will have to go somewhere more open-minded

*(this is your leverage right on on the line, no games and no sugar coating)*

**Boss:** (dumbfounded) .. What?

**You:** because this is how I see it... I work hard to be one of the top performers and continually improve. And honestly, I believe I'm one of your best guys here and you can always rely on me. So if you think headphones are a deal breaker, then fire me, because that's how I work. I work with headphones on because music helps me focus.

This is a great technique if you are delivering great work and don't want to have to submit yourself to some BS complaint just so that they can "play boss".

To understand the personality of "bosses playing the boss", Office Space has some great scenes by the way:

<https://youtu.be/jsLUidiYm0w>

The scene above exemplifies the type of bosses who have a need to "play boss".

That's so petty and low-quality that I would probably feel so bad for them that I would just let them have it.  
And I would simply look to improve myself and my life (ie.: the "real" solution).