

The Pros and Cons of Telling Off Your Boss

Getting even by quitting and telling your boss off is a dangerous tactic that's discouraged under all circumstances. Only consider this tactic if there is no threat of reprisal.

If **Johnny Paycheck** had predicted what damages would hit America's working masses, he would have thought twice about releasing "Take This Job and Shove It". It fulfilled every working person's fantasy. Paycheck crystallized all our feelings about the bosses we've hated and the joys of telling this loathsome person exactly how we feel. He struck a universal chord.

Thousands of disgruntled workers have taken Paycheck's advice and told their bosses what to do with their jobs. Initially, there were delicious feelings of sweet revenge. But then reality reared its omnipotent head. Like a thundercloud hanging over the heads of these workers, the future suddenly looked bleak. They wondered whether it was worth it.

Most of the people I spoke with who told off their bosses now regret it and admit it was an impulsive decision made without considering the repercussions.

The Dangers of Losing Your Cool

Consider what happened to a journalist buddy who worked closely with me on a Sunday supplement. I was the editor, he was the managing editor, and we both reported to a tyrannical publisher who deserved to spend the rest of his days in a straightjacket. The publisher was an old-school martinet who insisted upon doing things his way. Unfortunately, his way was usually the wrong way. But it was impossible to convince this burned-out relic that there was a better way to do things, especially if suggested by someone younger and smarter. That would have meant acknowledgment of his ignorance and his need to learn from a subordinate. My friend and I knew our boss would never experience that kind of revelatory epiphany.

With a good deal of deep-breathing exercises, not to mention frequent beers after work, I managed to stomach my boss. More important, I managed to coexist with this person. I reasoned that if I locked horns with him, I'd be arguing with him all day long and nothing would ever get done. When it came down to the wire, my responsibility was to meet my deadlines and get the paper out on schedule. My solution was to get him out of my hair by yessing him to death and then spinning on my heels and doing as I pleased.

My friend found that tactic offensive and continued to lock horns with him. Not a day went by when they didn't have at least one bad argument. Sometimes, they verbally sparred all day long. Around deadlines, especially, the tension was so thick you could cut it with a knife. And needless to say, it made everyone nervous. The tension became so bad that the publisher challenged practically everything my friend said. The issue of right and wrong was no longer important.

In short, the two men hated each other. At its core was not so much a personality dispute, but a generational conflict. The older man felt intimidated and challenged by the smart, feisty editor 35 years his junior. And my friend was incensed that he had to take orders from a loudmouthed moron who should have retired a decade ago.

Then it happened. To this day, my friend wishes he could have rewritten his life's script. It was just before Christmas, a typically hectic time for newspapers. Increased ad revenues translated into more editorial pages and longer hours for everyone. This is when astute management is critical. For my friend, who was responsible for coordinating advertising and editorial schedules, it was a living hell. The lunatic publisher kept on demanding that closings be extended in order to squeeze the last penny out of advertisers. But it also meant pushing back editorial schedules, which could throw off the entire publishing machine. In a word, it meant chaos. One busy day at 8 p.m., when we were all exhausted from working 12 straight hours, the publisher barged into my friend's office ordering him to delay closing an issue an extra day because he was expecting a big ad from a beverage company. That was the last straw as far as my friend was concerned.

Until then, he had worked hard at respectfully disagreeing with our boss. Tired, stressed, and pushed to the limit, he could not take it anymore. The publisher was asking for the impossible, and my friend was not about to alter the entire printing schedule for an additional \$5000 in ad income. He told the publisher he wasn't going to do it and that he was through taking orders from a "tired old washed-out incompetent who should be running a garment factory rather than publishing a newspaper." He didn't stop there. He unleashed a string of nasty expletives, which good taste dictates I leave out of this text, and ranted insults at the older man for 15 minutes. The outburst was unplanned and spontaneous. Even worse, it happened in our large editorial bullpen where everyone heard the fireworks.

My friend was relentless and kept on attacking the publisher where it hurt the most, about his age and incompetence. One of the last things my friend said was, "Why don't you give us all a break, get out of the business, and move to a retirement community in Florida? You won't be able to do any damage then."

Throughout the entire tirade, the stunned publisher quietly watched my friend rant and rave. Just when he was about finished, the publisher told my friend he'd made the biggest mistake of his career. My friend returned with, "I don't think so. I just saved my life. I can't work for a jerk like you for another second. Find another managing editor. I quit."

The Last Laugh

Through it all, the publisher kept his composure. Once my friend finished talking, he returned with, "Now I am going to have the last word. I'd like to see you in my office immediately." In this highly charged emotional situation, my friend found himself in the publisher's office.

Our boss may not have been the brightest publisher, but he certainly had an appetite for tactful revenge. Rather than continuing to make the argument a public event, he started playing the authority figure by demanding a private meeting, which quickly reaffirmed his position. If he had remained there bickering with my friend, he would have lost all credibility. Like a judge banning TV cameras from the courtroom, our boss turned the conflict between my friend and himself into a private matter. The boss suddenly went up a notch in our estimation, proving he wasn't the fool we all thought he was.

As soon as he got the younger man in his office, he mercilessly unloaded both barrels. In the quiet of the boss's office, the older man firmly reestablished his authority. My friend just sat and listened. Hardly 15 minutes before he had sounded his own death knell. Now the boss read him his last rites.

In plain English, the boss said his editor had crossed the line by violating all the rules of good taste. He told him that he had made a big mistake by quitting. Despite working for the newspaper for five years, he eliminated his entitlement to unemployment insurance. What's more, the boss pledged to do everything in his power to make sure my friend had a difficult time withdrawing his pension fund allotment. Legally, he couldn't prevent him from getting it, but he could certainly slow up the paperwork.

That's just for starters. The publisher told the editor he intended to put the word out to every newspaper in the city that my friend is a hot-tempered loose cannon who can't handle pressure and should not work in the high-stress newspaper industry, where cool heads and calm personalities are critical.

Naturally, like any vindictive boss, he planned on casting himself as a wronged supervisor who tried his best to deal with an impossible situation.

Within 24 hours of my friend's emotional outburst, the boss had e-mailed the publisher of every newspaper in the city and followed this up with a signed letter, leaving a paper trail.

In his scorching denouncement of my friend, the publisher altered the facts in his favor. Instead of saying that my friend quit, he reframed the facts and said that irrational, irresponsible behavior, compounded by a series of costly decisions, forced him to fire him despite a treacherous deadline.

Not only did the publisher get revenge, he also besmirched my friend's professional reputation. There was little question the younger man acted irrationally and tactlessly. However, his professional performance had been flawless and commendable. In the face of the worst possible working conditions, my friend always managed to make good decisions. In fact, he was one of the best managing editors I've ever known. Like many seasoned newspaper professionals, he thrived under pressure.

Unfortunately, few people will ever know he had to work under horrible conditions with an incompetent boss who'd be in bankruptcy court if not for an experienced staff who kept the publication afloat.

The publisher did everything he could think of to get even. He told the newspaper community that my friend lacked the essential attributes of a seasoned journalist: reliability, competence, accuracy, and most crucial, consistent performance under duress. He made sure he'd never get a staff job on any daily newspaper within the entire city. Unless he moved to another city, his only job options were a magazine job or, worse yet, writing press releases for a public relations firm, an embarrassing comedown after working for a prestigious newspaper.

Need I say more? You can translate the foregoing scenario to virtually any industry or job situation. More important, priceless advice can be extracted from this real-life saga.

Analysis: Paying the Price

Few people who tell off their bosses consider the price they may have to pay for a few moments of revenge. They should consider the following facts:

- The boss might retaliate. Like wounded animals, many despotic bosses will go to extensive lengths to ruin a former employee's reputation.
- The boss might lie or alter the facts to ruin the reputation or destroy the credibility of the employee who quit. Many bosses have actually used the phrase, "As long as I'm alive, I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure you never work in this town again." And many of them meant it.
- A crazed boss will go to any length to get revenge. If your boss is normally erratic, unpredictable, hot-tempered, irrational, or given to bursts of odd behavior, how do you think he or she will act when crossed, provoked, or pushed to the limit?

Take my friend's case. The younger man never imagined the publisher would lie and try to ruin his reputation. My friend waged an unwinnable war. Although my friend is smart and talented, the publisher is in the power seat. Naturally, some people will question the facts, but my friend was put in the indelicate position of having to clear his reputation and explain himself. Many publishers won't even question information from another publisher. Every industry has a power chain.

Publishers guard the bottom line and are considered more important than reporters and editors. Thus, they have more credibility.

Four Cardinal Rules of Career Building

1. Pocket your anger. Bridge burning is a poor choice. Needless to say, my friend regrets his emotional outburst. Unfortunately, he can't retract what he said in the heat of anger. Many people I spoke to who have told off their bosses wish they had pocketed their rage and kept their mouths shut. The majority never thought about the repercussions. Bridge burning is always a bad idea,
2. Never leave a job until you have another one to replace it. This commandment of job searching can be traced to the beginning of time, yet millions of people ignore it. Smart job seekers leverage their job experience. Regardless of the circumstances, most potential employers will consider you more valuable if you're still employed. As soon as you join the ranks of the unemployed, you lose valuable negotiating points. Employers ask a very obvious question: Why doesn't this person have a job?

3. Never underestimate the power of a wronged boss. What would you do if you were a boss and an employee berated and insulted you? Worse yet, what if the employee had the temerity to do it publicly? I'd want to get even in some way. For some, the thirst for revenge gets downright ugly. Many wronged bosses don't stop until they've ruined an employee's career.
4. Sometimes it pays to wait out a bad situation. It's not easy to take a deep breath and wait until things get better. But events or circumstances beyond your control often right themselves. If you stick around long enough, you could outlast your boss. I'm not suggesting that you wait a decade for your boss to get out of your hair, but bosses are transferred, take other jobs, retire, die, or are even fired, a thought that always draws a satisfied smile. If the stars are right, you may not have to leave the company. You may even wind up with your boss's job. Now there's a concept you never considered. What kind of boss will you be? Will you be an improvement on your boss or just as vicious, vindictive, and evil as he or she was? Obviously, you can't answer those questions until you are cast in that role.

The Best Situations for Telling Off Your Boss

One thing is certain. There is no optimal scenario for telling your boss where to go. The best you can hope for is doing so under decent conditions. They include the following:

- Switching to a new industry. It's the equivalent of moving to a new place and starting over. In this era of job hopping and career changing, it's very common to apply your skills in a new industry. Bosses are not omniscient. Thankfully, their reign of terror is confined to one industry. Once you've crossed industry lines, a former boss's power and influence suddenly disappear.
- Your boss has a long history of abuse. Some bad bosses are legends within their industry. In situations like this, their reputation precedes them. Telling off your boss could elevate you to hero status. You might draw comments like, "Good for you. It's a wonder more people in that division don't tell that lunatic where to go."
- You're financially secure and are about to retire. If you're into the finale of your career and are about to leave your job to do all the things you've dreamed about doing, go for it and tell your demon boss where to go. If you've bottled your rage for many years and played the controlled bureaucrat too long, give yourself some deserved satisfaction. If you're about to retire and have enough stashed away to live out the rest of your life in comfort, why not go out with a bang? Your boss can't hurt you.
- You have another job and your new boss is supportive. This is a power position, especially if you have the support of your new boss. Other than an occasional nightmare, there is little your old boss can do to harm you.
- Your boss is about to retire. Caution is still advised. If your boss was a known demon, it doesn't matter what you say to him or her. But if your boss still has friends in high places and is still going to play a role in your company, possibly in a consulting capacity or on the board of directors, think twice about getting even. Even though he won't be physically present, his influence can still be felt.

Consider the Future

The best advice is to consider the future before you act out Johnny Paycheck's tune. Ask yourself what damage will be incurred by telling off your boss. What will happen to your career, reputation, and credibility?

It's not easy stifling your anger if you've been stomaching a lunatic for 52 weeks a year. Nevertheless, I encourage you to try.

If you must confront your boss, do it discreetly. Avoid public displays of anger. Speak to your boss privately and try to stick to the issues at hand. Even though your boss has made your life miserable and has used every unsavory tactic in the book, don't stoop to his or her level. Avoid name-calling, screaming, ranting, and even though you may want to hurl the bane of your existence out the window, resist physical violence. Play it clean and quit

with honor. You'll applaud your self-control later. Don't let your boss have the last laugh.