

Strategies to Deal with Indecisive Bosses

Only flexible chameleons will succeed with the most difficult bosses. Make no assumptions about your work environment, especially the people you're going to be working with closely. Be ready to adapt to a changing working landscape.

Some lucky people get to the right place at the right time; but the majority had the right constitution and attitude for success. Their thinking went something like this: "I will get on with everybody, even insane and incompetent bosses. I'm not going to let anyone stand in my way." The rest of the working masses allow their environments to do them in.

Let's wind down with all-purpose strategies for getting along with the bosses we deal with all the time. These are not the unconventional, but the commonplace difficult ones we must get on with to build our careers.

Let's take it from the top and find out how to make a positive impression with a new boss.

Score Points with a New Boss

In the past, the majority of workers had two to three jobs in their lifetime. Many worked for one company, which often meant reporting to one boss for most of their career. If you moved up through the ranks, it meant scoring points with a couple of bosses. Yet, remaining in one company usually made it easier to adjust to your workplace and excel at your work.

Bosses were replaced when they retired, died, were promoted, or transferred. Today, having many bosses is common. And the reasons are all of the above plus frequent takeovers, mergers, acquisitions, and reorganizations.

Unlike the past, where each boss had his or her own special agenda which usually meant bringing in new talent and undertaking new projects, new bosses are usually brought in to tighten the organization so it's leaner, meaner, and more profitable.

Even though the worst of corporate downsizing is over, it's still taking place. Each month, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics releases new "separation" figures, revealing companies' obsession with discarding excess human baggage.

Bottom-line thinking says each employee must carry his or her own weight. Many companies have gone to great lengths to keep their payrolls as lean as possible. If there is a way to outsource by using consultants, temps, or contract workers, companies will jump at the opportunity to pare operating costs.

Keep these facts of business life in mind if you have to score points with a new boss. Most new bosses bring an agenda with them which reads: Get things done quickly, efficiently, and cheaply.

First Impressions Count

What with rapid turnover and constant corporate overhauls and reorganizations, if you've been with a company for more than five years, chances are you've had your fair share of new Getting on with Other Bosses. Depending on how they stack up with your former boss, they probably rated from good to atrocious. Whether you like or detest them, you have no choice but to get along with them.

Whether you have inherited a demon or a saint, if you are smart you will start off on the right foot by making a great first impression. How you make that initial favorable impression depends on your circumstances and the personal chemistry between you and your boss.

Proactive Approach

Some management consultants recommend what they call the "proactive approach." Rather than waiting for your boss to tell you what he or she wants, they advise knocking on his or her door and making your presence known by offering a helping hand. Before he knows where the restrooms are located, you're offering to be his seeing-eye dog.

This is a presumptuous tactic that should not be recommended. Strategic career builders have the good sense to back off and allow their new bosses breathing room so they can get the lay of the land. Building relationships with staffers is often not an immediate priority, a fact of company life that many narcissistic overachievers can't fathom.

More important issues for many new bosses include meeting with their bosses to find out what's expected of them and getting a feeling for corporate protocol. After that, it is learning about who does what and figuring out how to get things done. When all that is accomplished, it's time to sit down with the troops in order to get down to the mission at hand.

Most new bosses sort out all this introductory protocol within the first 3 to 5 days on the job. Companies don't appreciate long start-up periods for either workers or bosses. As one human resources person from a Fortune 500 company put it, "If you can't get yourself together and straighten out your priorities within the first week on the job, it's doubtful you're going to last. We have no time for handholding."

Wait for the SOP Meeting

Once many new bosses figure out how things work, they schedule a meeting with their employees to explain what Lyle Sussman, coauthor with Sam Deep of *Smart Moves: 14 Steps to Keep Any Boss Happy* (Addison-Wesley), calls standard operating procedure (SOP). "It's a common practice in many companies," he says. "The new boss simply spells out his philosophy and communicates his style and expectations. Usually, they're very brief meetings. It's as basic as this-is-who-I-am, this-is-what-I-believe, and this-is-how-I-want-things-done."

The SOP meetings are also an opportunity for bosses to get to know staffers and for staffers to ask questions and get a better sense of where their boss is coming from. Sussman deems these SOP meetings a positive start. "They eliminate all anxiety for staffers because they know exactly what to expect from their boss," he says. "They don't have to waste time and energy trying to figure out what their boss wants and what it takes to keep this person off their backs."

While SOP meetings are ideal starting points for building a healthy working relationship between bosses and employees, many bosses don't hold these critical briefing meetings. It simply doesn't occur to many new bosses. Then what? Don't panic. Often, it's nothing to worry about, says Sussman. "If no meeting is conducted and the boss gives you signals that nothing will change and it's business as usual, then continue doing what you have been doing. Don't make it an issue."

However, if you pick up signals or vibrations that things aren't quite right, it's time to sit down with your boss and find out what's on his or her mind before things get worse. The strongest signal, says Sussman, is "tension in the air." "It's hard to describe, yet it's something you feel. I compare it to sensing a pending storm about to erupt."

Getting on with Other Bosses

Advice: If you sense tension or negative vibrations, Sussman and other business consultants urge acting quickly. "Things can get very bad very fast," Sussman asserts. The goal is try to find out if there is anything you're doing that is rubbing your boss the wrong way

Communication is the key that opens the door to a good relationship with a new boss who doesn't know how to ask for what he or she wants. If your boss can't communicate with you, you must communicate with him. You have to be prepared to take the first step.

"If your boss doesn't communicate expectations, it can lead to disappointment by both you and your boss,"

explains Stephen Gilliland, an organizational consultant and associate professor of management and policy at the University of Arizona, Tucson. "Your boss will be disappointed with your performance and you, in turn, will be disappointed because your boss has no idea what you are doing and what you would like to accomplish. Both parties are frustrated with each other."

While Gilliland concedes most bosses are poor communicators, he also observes that most employees are afraid to ask for feedback. The reasons are fear of rejection and negative criticism.

Advice: Recognizing that poor or no communication could be a major stumbling block in your relationship with your new boss, nip the problem in the bud by sitting down with him or her and discussing expectations. Don't wait for your boss to take the first step. "Communicating expectations is a low priority for most bosses and for new bosses it's hardly a consideration because all their time and energy is consumed with adjusting to their job," says Gilliland.

The Personal Meeting

During a quiet time of the day, maybe after lunch or late afternoon, ask if you can have a few minutes of your boss's time. "Casual" and "informal" are the operative words. If your boss asks you brusquely, "What's on your mind, Fred?" you return with a low key, "I'd like to tell you what I do and find out a little about your expectations. It would help me greatly in my job."

That gentle introduction should set the tone for a relaxed conversation. Consider this sample presentation by a worker to his boss:

I don't know whether you got a chance to peruse my records or PAs [performance appraisals]. But allow me to give you a brief description of what I do and what I'm trying to accomplish. I have been with the company for 4 years. I started as a copy intern when I was a senior in college. When I graduated, I was asked to join the company as a copywriter assistant and was assigned to three cosmetics accounts. I reported to the senior copywriter on each of these accounts. It was a great experience because I learned agency fundamentals from three bosses, each of whom gave me a different perspective. I was promoted to junior copywriter 2 years later on the Gex-X Cosmetics and Hurley Perfume accounts. That's what I've been doing ever since. I have been specializing in print, but I am anxious to do TV work as well. I'd like to be able to write for both mediums. When you see some of the ads I've written over the last 2 years, I think you'll agree they've gotten leaner and more focused. Also, the hooks are more polished. My goal is to be promoted to senior copywriter and be totally responsible for one account. I'm ready and I would like to prove that to you. I've been concentrating on every detail of the copy preparation process just short of account management. I eagerly seek out criticism from not only my supervisors but my peers as well. Is there anything else I should be doing?

Analysis: On a scale of 1 to 100, what score would you give this employee? I'd give him a 95. Maybe he didn't have to present a synopsis of his work history with the company, but he managed to strike all the right chords. His tone and attitude were both on the money.

Here is what he did right: His approach was non-confrontational. It wasn't, "Hey, what's your problem? I am doing a great job. How come you can't see it?" He didn't put his boss on the defensive. Instead, he said, in effect, "I need some guidance and input. I care very much about my job and my career and I want to know if I'm on the right track. If not, what can I do to veer back onto the right path?"

In short, this employee had the good sense to put himself in his boss's hands. By doing so, he had the courage to open himself up to criticism, a posture other workers might avoid.

In sum, this worker made himself, rather than his boss, the focus of the conversation. From the onset, he never crossed the power line. He respected his boss's position and authority without being obsequious or fawning.

You can't help but win with an approach like that. Even tough-skinned bosses will soften under this approach. Five minutes into the conversation, the boss will see you're an ally rather than an adversary. Even under ideal conditions, when the company is expanding aggressively and profits are high, new bosses need all the help they can get.

This worker has done a great job of ingratiating himself into his boss's good graces. That translates to big points when promotions are doled out.

Keep the Communication Lines Open

If the meeting with your new boss goes well, take advantage of your good fortune by keeping the communication lines open. Rather than making it a one-shot conversation, ask for permission to keep the dialogue going. You might say, "Would it be possible to schedule a monthly feedback session? It would help me a great deal. I can keep you abreast of what projects I am working on and where I am headed."

Chances are your boss will welcome the idea. He or she might return with, "It sounds good to me. I think we could both benefit from the chat." End of story.

While new bosses require more of your attention, bosses who have been with the company for many years still have to be managed. The following are some more tips for coping with difficult bosses.

Indecisive Bosses

Outsiders find indecisive bosses hard to uncover because they're artists at covering their inadequacies. They also deserve high marks in the self-awareness category. It's their knowledge of their own ineptitude that drives them to take credit for the work of others.

Talented workers, especially, are an indecisive boss's passport to career longevity. As long as they surround themselves with bright, self-assured underlings, they're safe. No one but their staff ever really knows about their deficiencies. Naturally, they're not about to pull the plug on their boss and risk losing their job.

On closer scrutiny, indecisive bosses are easy to spot. Their insecurity gives them away. Whether it's stupidity or fear of making a decision, they'll find a way to avoid it. Even in crisis situations, they'll cleverly find a way to avoid putting a noose around their neck. They'll feign sickness, invent a family crisis, take a vacation day, or schedule a business trip to remove themselves from the situation. But they'll find a way to call upon an intelligent subordinate to make the decision and will take full credit for that decision.

Similarly, indecisive bosses are reluctant to sign off on anything controversial that might cast them in a negative light.

They'll go to elaborate lengths to avoid a risky situation. Once again, they'll consult with bright subordinates to find out how to handle the situation. In fact, indecisive bosses have been known to call subordinates at home to pick their brains. A securities analyst employed by a brokerage house said he felt like his boss's confidential adviser:

In the 6 years I have reported to her, I have never known her to make an important decision by herself. Frightened and insecure, she relies on three senior staffers to make big decisions. Whenever she is in dire straits, she has a knack for finding me. She has no compunction about calling me at any hour. One summer, I was vacationing at a remote cabin on a lake. Mistakenly, I gave my boss my telephone number for emergencies. I never thought she'd actually call. I was wrong. One night she called me at 11 p.m. because she was summoned to an emergency strategy meeting scheduled for the following morning and didn't have a clue what suggestions to offer. It was pathetic to hear the tension in her voice. She picked my brain for a half hour before she had enough ideas to make a good impression.

Analysis: Coping with strategies and indecisive bosses are human parasites. On one hand, they're a sad bunch because they'll do anything to avoid making decisions. On the other hand, they can be manipulative and are not to be trusted. They'll go to great lengths to keep high-performing subordinates close to them at all times. George Fuller, author of *The Workplace Survival Guide* (Prentice Hall), warns that indecisive bosses are reluctant to give star performers good performance appraisals. Says Fuller, "Before you sit down for a performance evaluation with an indecisive boss, rest assured your performance evaluation will be mediocre. This is because an indecisive boss will be reluctant to lose a good worker by way of a promotion." Fuller adds that indecisive bosses are not beyond

downplaying your contributions in public.

Advice: Watch your back. Do not underestimate the self-protective skills of indecisive bosses. They'll go to elaborate extremes to protect their position.

If you hope to move up the ladder and advance your career, the two obvious options are transferring to a new department or finding another job. In either scenario, you'd best keep a record of your accomplishments so you can move quickly when opportunity knocks. The good news is that your indecisive boss has given you incredible opportunities to spotlight your talents. Be prepared to document them when given the chance.

Until you make your move, stay out of your indecisive boss's way. Whatever you do, don't make the mistake of confiding in him or her. Most important, build allies within the company and make sure senior management knows about your accomplishments. The more support you have, the easier it will be to get away from your indecisive boss.

Delegator Bosses

A close cousin of the indecisive boss is the delegator boss. Delegator bosses can be a mixed blessing. Because they lack the ability to organize their workload and get things done, they delegate to others. One worker referred to them as "dumpers." Delegator bosses will mercilessly delegate work to save their jobs. The more pressured they feel, the more they delegate.

The flip side is the more work you take off your boss's incompetent hands, the better your chances of taking over his or her job. Don't underestimate the power of senior management. No matter how well entrenched your boss is, companies have no compunction about discarding dead weight. Justice may one day be served, and you stand to come out ahead.

Fuller notes that there are several pitfalls to working for a delegator boss:

The boss doesn't communicate what is expected of you. Don't expect to get a lot of input from a delegator boss. The longer you work for one, the better you become at filling in the blanks. Make your life easy by plying your boss with questions so you know how to satisfy his or her objectives. You don't have time to do all the work the boss is delegating.

Often, delegator bosses will give assignments to the best workers in the department, according to Fuller. If you don't think you can complete a task because you're overloaded with your own work, let the boss know this fact when the task is assigned. The boss will either be forced to assign the work elsewhere or allow you to complete it at your own speed.

You're not given adequate resources to do the job. Delegator bosses have a knack for assigning projects without providing necessary resources, be it people or equipment. To avoid problems, let the boss know, preferably in writing, what you need to complete a project properly. "If the resources aren't furnished, then you are off the hook for not completing the task," says Fuller.

The boss asks you to do a job that makes you unpopular. Delegator bosses often assign dirty jobs that can make you look bad in front of coworkers and managers. Gracefully decline by saying you are burdened with too much work. If there is no way to get out of it, Fuller suggests quietly using the grapevine to spread the word that you were assigned the job against your wish. This way, you don't look bad. The boss doles out horrible jobs to you. Be careful. Many delegator bosses look for easy targets to delegate the worst jobs. Once you accept a terrible job, count on being saddled with it for as long as you report to this person. Avoid problems by declining grunt jobs as soon as they're assigned.

Possible excuses: "I've got too much on my plate." If that fails, try honesty: "I find this task unpleasant and beneath me. My talents would be better applied to more challenging projects." You may not be fired, but you could be ignored or, better yet, transferred to another department.

There is no pleasing this type of boss. No matter what you do or how hard you try, there is no pleasing this person. Fuller points out that if the boss was a true perfectionist, the work wouldn't have to be delegated in the first place. Once again, choices must be made. Do you grin and bear it and wait for better opportunities to present themselves or lose your cool in a moment of anger and tell your incompetent boss where to go? Take deep breaths and follow the former strategy.

Your boss takes credit for your successes but blames you for his failures. You can't win. Your successes are his successes but your failures are your demerits. It sounds worse than it is.

But don't underestimate other people's reading of the situation. Delegator bosses ultimately fashion their own nooses.

Says Fuller, "Although you may not be getting credit for your good work, everyone else, including other managers, knows where the credit belongs."

Bully Bosses

Finally, there are obnoxious bully bosses. They rule by intimidation, insist on getting their way, and fly off the handle easily. They have little concern for other people's feelings. They also treat subordinates as children and seldom ask for anyone's input.

Solutions: Tactful manipulation yields stunning results. Don't become a victim of your boss's madness. If that happens, you're doomed. Sussman and Deep suggest studying your boss's behavior to fashion an avoidance strategy. Resist the temptation to engage your bully boss in a verbal battle. No matter what you say, you'll lose because he or she holds all the power. If you decide to confront your bully boss, "indicate how her behavior is endangering her success," advise authors Sussman and Deep. "Without challenging, threatening, moralizing, or judging, talk about how the behavior is lowering morale and productivity." Here's what you can say: "I find it difficult to excel under circumstances where I am pressured by more than my work, where I am unable to predict moods, and where I'm not trusted. As a result, the work of my unit declines."

It's time to wind down. I've only scratched the surface, and it would take 500 more pages to do the subject justice. I've covered enough ground to give you the ammunition to deal with most crazy bosses. The important message is that you're not alone and are not to blame for your boss's bizarre behavior. First, you must understand the dynamics of the situation and then take action. Whatever you decide to do, your ultimate goal should be to advance your career. Don't let crazy bosses stand in your way. Instead, see them as steppingstones to a higher achievement. If you don't, you're destined to wallow in mediocrity.