



A Universal Occupational Hazard

OK, be honest. Is your boss a congenial, pleasant colleague? Or, is he or she more like Simon Legree or Lady MacBeth—people whose fragile egos, changeable moods, and volatile personalities could qualify their employees for hazard insurance?

Dealing with difficult bosses is an occupational hazard that most of us face sometime in our careers. How we handle such bosses can be key not just to job longevity, but also to our day-to-day sanity, especially if we work for organizations that operate like dysfunctional families.

Many of us have had bosses who were gate-keepers, naysayers, control freaks, and petty dictators. But what do you do when your boss undergoes a personality change, starts to micromanage, or does other things not in keeping with his or her normal behavior.

Consider Frank's situation.

Frank is a professional with impeccable HRD credentials. Widely respected by his company's line managers as someone who "always gets the job done," he enjoys a stellar reputation both in and outside his organization. He writes and speaks widely on HRD topics, and just last year garnered a prestigious national award from a human resources professional group.

Nothing negative has ever blemished Frank's work record. And his boss of many years has always been among his biggest fans. Until recently.

"Over the years, Anne has supported me in many ways," says Frank. "She has given me challenging assignments, promoted me four times, and talked frequently about my long-term career prospects in the organization.

"Then not long ago, she began to micromanage me, questioning my decisions and even nixing my recommendations about who to promote on my own staff. I found that inappropriate and insulting. And it continues! I'm wondering whether there's a message in her meddling. Is she trying to get me to quit?"

Is Anne trying to tell Frank to move

on? Maybe. We all know talented people who have been squeezed out of their positions because they threatened an insecure boss.

But Anne's change in behavior could be due to many factors, such as pressure to make staff changes or cut the budget. Her boss might be leaning on her to manage people more closely. Or, difficulties in Anne's personal life—the illness of a child or a pending divorce—could be affecting her business judgment.

Then again, Frank may have become so successful inside the organization that Anne feels that he might eclipse her in influence or take her job. She may even have an imperial attitude about her staff (many bosses do), feeling that she has to remind Frank every so often that he works for her.

What should Frank do in this situation? What should you do?

First, do a quick reality check. Is your job performance up to par? Is your boss leveling legitimate criticism, or does it seem like a smokescreen for something else?

Maybe your boss has observed aspects about you that could stand improvement. None of us, after all, is perfect. So, listen up if the criticism seems on target. If it doesn't, try to determine what is motivating your boss's new behavior. And try not to take the criticism personally. It's tough not to. As employees, we tend to believe what our bosses say. But you have got to detach. Otherwise, you'll begin doubting your ability to read a situation for what it really is.

For example, the rudeness or impatience that your boss may be displaying toward you could reflect trouble at home or problems with a peer.

For some perspective, tap into your informal network at work. See whether anyone knows the real story and can be a sounding board. Be discreet, however, and ask only people you really trust. Outside of work, talk to friends and professional contacts that can provide emotional support and a detached professional perspective.

Consider whether it's appropriate to confront your boss about his or her behavior toward you, or to let it pass

for now. When dealing with problems or job pressures, people sometimes erupt. Your boss might be no different. Apologies can come quickly on the heels of emotional outbursts or unwarranted criticism. So, see whether the incident blows over before deciding whether to take action.

If your boss keeps giving you a hard time for reasons you don't understand, bring the issue to a head. For example, say, "I understand you think I haven't been as diligent on this as I should have been. Can you explain why, considering that you've found my actions on this matter appropriate in the past?"

If a dialogue doesn't clear the air (or worsens the situation), consider moving on.

Sometimes, long-term work relationships breed contempt between bosses and staff members. In Frank's case, his boss was also his long-time mentor. Over time, mentor-protégé relationships tend to change. Protégés mature, altering the dynamics of the relationship. A mentor may fail to notice that a protégé has become a seasoned professional. And a protégé may hesitate to move on to new professional opportunities.

It takes judgment and maturity to deal effectively with the communications issues between you and your boss. Though it's tough to know best how to approach such issues, don't ignore them.

The traditional boss-employee relationship has been predicated on a parent-child relationship. In the current workplace, that's not appropriate (if, in fact, it ever was).

Just as you can't afford to defer your career plans to accommodate your boss, you can't afford to view your boss as a surrogate parent.

Your work relationship with your boss must be based on trust and mutual respect. Otherwise, it isn't a relationship at all.

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