



How to Deal with a Toxic Boss

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How a Toxic Boss Affects an Organization

You often hear that people don't quit a job — they quit a boss. The toxic boss gets top employees thinking, "Maybe this isn't the job for me?" or "I've gotta get out of this place." Top leadership in organizations should realize that a toxic boss can accelerate staff turnover, causing capable employees to leave the firm. Finding, replacing, and training employees is expensive for companies, plus there's the lost productivity during the time the position is open as well as when the new hire gets up to speed on their new responsibilities. "[Employee Benefit News](#) (EBN) reports that it costs employers 33% of a worker's annual salary to hire a replacement if that worker leaves. In dollar figures, the replacement cost is \$15,000 per person for an employee earning a median salary of \$45,000 a year, according to the Work Institute's [2017 Retention Report](#). For those that stay on the job, their productivity can plummet because of a toxic boss, which might cause top executives to start asking questions.

What Is a Toxic Boss?

A toxic boss is someone who poisons the work atmosphere, derails the work team, and destroys morale and job satisfaction. Here's my list of toxic boss traits in no particular order:

- Inauthentic (a.k.a. a phony)
- Incompetent as a leader — lacks the soft skills necessary to manage people
- Untrustworthy — lacks integrity
- Duplicitous — two-faced
- Dictatorial — implements ideas without listening to input from others and considering the ramifications of their idea
- Power — has it but doesn't know how and when to use it

- Micromanager — habitual nitpicker
- Stubborn — chronically inflexible
- Hypercritical
- Short-tempered
- Lacks self-awareness — they don't realize how their behaviors impact other people
- Self-promoter — takes credit for other's accomplishments
- Outsized ego — takes credit for your accomplishments and the team's success
- Difficulty dealing with people
- Has an inflated view of their own abilities and accomplishments — insecure, so never compliments or recognizes others' good work
- Envious of their more capable subordinates
- Messy personal life
- Mean-spirited

Jerry's New Toxic Boss

Jerry is a friend I mentor from time to time on various organizational and behavioral management subjects. Recently, Jerry's original boss, whom he liked, abruptly left the company. Jerry's good boss was replaced by Marla, a toxic boss (see list above).

My friend thought he had his dream job before Marla came along. Jerry and his colleagues consider Marla a total disaster. When I asked Jerry what makes Marla toxic he replied, "In looking at your list of what makes a boss toxic, I think I hit the jackpot, because Marla has all of these deficiencies."

Jerry's Toxic Boss Dilemma: Considerations

Jerry's dilemma is that he likes the company, the people are great, the work is satisfying, the money and benefits are good and he does not want to leave. This is wise because rule number one when dealing with a toxic boss is never doing anything rash and impulsive. Step back and ask yourself these questions:

- What attributes do you look for in a boss?
- What makes your new boss toxic?
- Does your opinion concur with your colleagues' opinion of the new boss? Is there a consensus on your team about how to deal with the situation?
- What is your new boss's background? An outside hire or promoted from within the organization? How long has she been with the company? What were her prior positions? What's her background?
- Do you think any of the executives your boss reports to are aware of your boss's toxicity and the low morale of your team?
- What power do you have in this situation? What are your options?
- Is there any way you can see a tolerable working relationship with the toxic boss?

Ten Observations, Thoughts, and Truisms about Toxic Bosses

You might wonder how toxic bosses can be so prevalent in the workplace. After all, companies spend billions annually on human relations, management skills, and leadership education. Why do so many of us have stories about our own experiences with toxic bosses? Here are a few points to consider:

- Accept it as a fact of your career: Everyone will most likely work for at least one toxic boss at some point in their career. The toxic boss syndrome is as pervasive as the common cold and it occurs in nearly every organization.
- Companies often make the mistake of assuming proficiency in technical skill can make the employee an effective manager. Many times this is just not true. A top performing accountant, systems analyst, salesperson, engineer, or microbiologist may not be an effective leader if promoted into a role that requires managing a team. In many instances, the technically accomplished worker who is promoted to a managerial position has not had adequate mentorship and/or career training on how to be a boss. This newly promoted boss will struggle to get loyalty and performance from the team.
- A new boss represents a major culture shift within the work unit, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse.
- One of the biggest drivers in personal job satisfaction is our day-to-day relationship with the boss. If the boss is a jerk, our job satisfaction will plummet.
- You may or may not want to discuss the toxic situation with your human resources (HR) personnel. They may offer a perspective that is useful and may be able to make some suggestions that will help you deal with the situation. Before going to human resources, try to determine if they are aligned with employees or strictly with management.
- If significant legal exposure exists because of the toxic boss's behavior, you may be more likely to get the attention of HR. Major policy or legal violations, such as sexual harassment or blatant discrimination against a subordinate because of their lifestyle must be reported. These types of incidents expose a company to serious, and expensive, legal risk. Consider the possibility that your complaint may be escalated to upper management. Be sure to document all incidents.
- Does the toxic boss's own supervisor care about the impact this person is having on the team? While you may feel the situation is obvious, if your boss's work unit produces satisfactory numbers and there are no major disasters, those above the toxic boss may not be aware of any issues.
- Keep a confidential log containing cursory notes on instances of your boss's behavior with examples in a secure place. After a while you will see a pattern and figure out how to deal with the person. For me, I have found it emotionally healthy to "journalize" my feelings as I deal with these situations.

- Related to the above, how do you deal tactically (short-term, day-to-day) and strategically (career arch, upward mobility, long-term job stability and so forth) with any new boss and, in particular, one that is toxic?
- In many cases, you can outlast a toxic boss. Typically the behavior is a pattern, and eventually it will catch up with them. This point is good to remember on the particularly tough days.

Change Can Be Stressful

Harvey Kane, a *McHugh Advisor*, offered this advice:

A new boss or manager is at times hard to accept. Your new boss will have different perspectives and may have been put in place just because of that. The new boss often brings change and that alone tends to rock the boat.

The new boss may have been given a mandate to shake things up and, in a manner of speaking, break up what appears to be a well-working department. A wise employee should begin with a period of silence, observation and evaluation. This can be labeled *company politics*.

Before making the judgment that the new manager is toxic, I suggest sitting back, observe the new boss, and withhold judgment. After a long-time manager left the company, the new manager asked, 'What makes you think change is not for the good?'

Ten Ways of Dealing with a New Toxic Boss

1. Don't take it personally. It's not you, it is the boss. Most likely your toxic boss is an equal opportunity jerk.
2. Don't be argumentative or belligerent. A negative demeanor will bring out more toxicity in your boss and, for you, that is a no-win situation.
3. Give it time. In some cases, a new boss can initially come across as toxic because they may be new to leadership and don't realize the need to soften the sharp edges. New bosses sometimes start off on the wrong foot for a number of reasons, including insecurity, inexperience, and wanting to appear in charge.
4. Have a heart-to-heart discussion with the boss — what are their expectations? What are your expectations of a boss? Ask what you can do to help. In many cases, the boss may not even realize how their behavior affects people and may change once you point this out in a nonthreatening manner.
5. Learn to go along without compromising your integrity. It's your job to learn how to work with the new boss just as it is the boss's responsibility to learn how to work with each member of the team.

6. Let the boss know you are on their team, and that you want to help them succeed.
7. Do not do anything impetuous like quitting your job. Be an adult. You can take some static in your work life. Quitting is usually a mistake.
8. Do not badmouth your boss with your fellow workers, as constant complaining about the situation can further destroy morale. Moreover, it often can make you look bad. Your coworkers might wonder what you say about them behind their backs.
9. Maybe top execs will recognize your boss's toxicity and either transfer or fire them.
10. The toxic boss might move on and leave the company of their own accord.

Having a toxic boss can be stressful and make a job that you otherwise enjoy become unbearable. Keep in mind that all of us will likely have one or more toxic bosses in our career. Follow some of the tips here, and keep the experience in mind for your own management style to ensure you never become someone else's toxic boss.

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