



## How to be Your Boss's New Best Friend

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If there is any belief in the universe more ubiquitous than the belief that there is a universe, it is the belief that Boss's are Idiots (aka iBosses). The genetic pre-disposition (nature) crowd believes that many people in positions of institutional authority were imbued with the stupid gene at conception. Subscribers to environmental influence (nurture) theory appear to believe that the boss's need for around-the-clock adult supervision results from neurological damage caused by prolonged exposure to hypocrisy in high places and misleading mission statements. Either way, the idea of boss-as-idiot is eternally popular across cultures and generations.

How many among us were socialized from early childhood to believe that boss's are the bane of a working person's existence? Movies like Office Space, Nine-to-Five, and Horrible Bosses filled theatres. Songs like Take This Job and Shove It and television shows like The Office filled the airwaves. Scott Adams' Dilbert is a desk calendar icon. Our parents complained about their bosses at the dinner table. We took up the crusade during pre-adolescence and complained about our teachers and school administrators. After graduation, we settled into an adult lifetime of projecting our unresolved adolescent rebellion issues on the most visible and available target—the boss. Bosses depicted in media have no character development arc (see Horrible Bosses). Bosses are boobs in frame one and they are still boobs through the closing credits. The bottom line: there is no known redemption for bosses.

On National Bosses Day, October 16, while the jury is out and scholars the world over debate whether or not the phenomenon of idiots in positions of corporate power is a cause or effect, chicken or egg, a deliberate conspiracy, or a hiccup in evolution, can we put enough love in our hearts to declare a truce in the barrage of boss abuse? That's right. Give the boss a break. Who knows, Louis, it might be the start of a beautiful

friendship. We can start by locking up the Killer B's of boss-hood in a Ball jar. Whether or not you unscrew the lid and let them out again on October 17 is up to you.

### The Killer "B's"

Turning one or more of the following killer bees, an alliteration for four behaviors beginning with the letter "B" (Boss Bashing, Boss Blaming, Boss Bickering, or Boss Baiting) that are best abandoned in the pursuit of positive relations with your I-Boss, loose on your boss might seem like fun—ultimately a fair thing to do in light of what the boss has forced you to suffer. But, in the end, you'll be the one who gets stung; perhaps literally and figuratively in the end.

Delayed gratification is the operative thought here. Delayed to the point that you replace righteously indignant fantasies of wielding a sword of justice with a positive plan to engender and sustain a relational environment wherein you can serenely sail through whatever tropical disturbance your boss stirs up.

### Killer B Number One: Boss Bashing

Don't be part of a conversation that your boss couldn't walk into unexpectedly without your needing to do some serious damage control. When you find yourself headed toward the "B" topic with friends, family, coworkers, or perfect strangers, turn around 180 degrees and walk away from that evil place as quickly as possible. Keep yourself and your reputation on the high road by turning at least 90 degrees and:

- (1) Change the subject from the boss to a bigger challenge you're facing in the marketplace. It's easy to fall into our pre-programmed habit of boss bashing instead of looking at who gets out of bed every morning with the expressed purpose of dis-employing you—your competition.
- (2) Make a bigger play. Refocusing the discussion on the state of the domestic and global economy and how to best swim in those waters is a far more important conversation and relevant to your long-term future. In other words, go big picture.
- (3) Acknowledge that many aspects of life are challenging. So, what else is new? Politely decline the invitation to bash your boss (or anybody else's) and disconnect from the boss bashing by saying that you're committed as a general life principle to finding ways in which everybody can win. Then turn the conversation back to someone else in the room.

### Killer B Number Two: Blaming the Boss

Being a blame thrower at work sends a strong message that you have no interest in being part of the team, part of the solution, or part of the future. Remember, everything you say or do, don't say or don't do, and many things you merely think, all make a statement about you. When tempted to transfer responsibility to the boss so as not to appear tarnished by any sort of failure on your part, think more broadly. Regardless of the boss's ineptitude, you're part of a team. More than likely, the Kahunas up the organizational food chain identify you as a member of "[insert boss's name]'s team." They're not going to see you as an innocent bystander if the team fails. So, look at responsibility as a team effort.

- (1) It is self-incriminating to blame others for problems. Why even go there? Pointing the proverbial finger at your boss leaves three more equally proverbial fingers pointing back at you.
- (2) Any time there is accountability to be absorbed, jump on it as an opportunity. When you say, "I'll take responsibility for my part in that," or "I'll be accountable for this or that part of the program," you're sending a

solid message that you aren't going to stink up the room by stepping in the small stuff. You're invested in your success and everybody's success.

(3) Blaming is about people, not the problem. Aim high, when the search for the scapegoat begins and lead the conversation quickly back to the problem you're solving for. What is the larger agenda and how do you break it down to produce a better outcome next time? It's about getting all energies focused on solutions and getting disentangled from blaming and personality disputes as quickly as possible lest you get sucked into that black hole of blaming.

### **Killer B Number Three: Bickering with the Boss**

This "B" is often a killer because many iBosses are legendary for making horrendously bad decisions and forcing you to comply or even carry out the dirty deeds yourself. Inasmuch as you can exert influence where you have limited authority, help your boss to make better decisions. Consider when it's best to go ahead and get the work done that will promote your boss's agenda and save your energy to fight a more important battle.

When you find yourself wanting to be arbitrarily contrary and nit, nit, nit-pick at your boss, think better of it. Like boss bashing, bickering with your boss will forge a reputation for you of being more of an annoyance than someone with generative ideas and sound judgment. Is it really that important to win approval among your disgruntled peers? Where do you want your picture in the dictionary, beside "annoyance" or "good ideas and sound judgment?"

(1) No matter what you're asked to do, carry it out with dignity. There is no need to walk around singing The Greatest Love of All. Unless you want to. Yet, even if your iBoss compels you to do some crappy things, it doesn't mean you need to conduct yourself in a crappy way. Whatever you do, conduct yourself in a way that sends a clear message as to what you're all about.

(2) If you want to argue a point with your iBoss, practice the proverbial "yes and" instead of launching with "Yes, but" or just plain, "but." Say, "If we're going to follow that path, I think we should keep our eyes open and be prepared to flex and accommodate whatever unexpected responses we might receive." Okay, you said it. Nobody can argue with that. You're being strategic and the boss will feel you have his or her back.

(3) When your peers or your own subordinates try to engage you in bickering behavior or to bicker with the boss, steer the conversation to some higher principle you're operating under. Say, "I know, I know," because you do know. You get it. But, immediately follow with, "The problem we're solving for here is..."

### **Killer B Number Four: Baiting the Boss**

Move over baseball, boss-baiting has become a national pastime for many people. Some folks are so stuck in the boss-as-enemy space, regardless of who it is or what the circumstances are, that the day won't be complete without a good poke at the person in charge. The boss is under pressures you are not likely aware of and is probably stuck in a vise or a cage. Either way it's a chicken poop play to poke at a trapped animal.

The loftier response is to view the vise-like pressure the boss is feeling as an opportunity for you to help ease the strain and do for your iBoss what you wish the boss would do for you. In Aesop's Fables, Androcles saved his own life by removing the thorn from the paw of his natural enemy, the lion. If you've been raised to believe the boss is your natural enemy, you can turn the tables by deliberately and systematically engaging in acts of kindness and helpfulness.

Too warm and fuzzy? Try calling it enlightened self-interest. The people I'm guessing you least want to be around are those who brown nose the boss all day long, giving every appearance of removing the thorn from the boss's paw—perhaps even doing so—and then giggling maniacally as they strategically place the thorn on the boss's chair.

(1) If it becomes apparent that the boss is operating with one hand tied behind her back, be aware that she will be viewed with great sympathy by her peers. There is a simpatico at her level that you don't qualify for at your level. How you respond will be on display for numerous audiences: your boss's peers and superiors, your peers, and your subordinates. Make sure the behavior you adopt vis-à-vis your boss is the same behavior you display with the other groups, especially your peers and subordinates.

(2) Schedule acts of kindness. Seriously, this stuff is too important to be left to chance. Don't wait for a good moment to arrive—make one. This is not about fetching coffee. Unless you want to. It's about managing by walking around. Dave Packard of (Bill) Hewlett & Packard fame is credited with this notion. If your boss isn't doing it, go do a drive-by with your boss and bring a progress report about something important.

(3) Make your boss's cage more livable by keeping principles high and the personality stuff in check. If you know where his or her stress is coming from, take on one "stretch" task that will relieve some of the pressure. Not all of it—you have enough to do. But, the gesture is all that may be required to send the distinct message that you have "chosen into" the firm and not "chosen out."

This appeal for leniency for iBosses on National Bosses' Day is as much for the benefit of beleaguered employees as it is for bosses. No one even enhanced his or her career by making the boss look stupid. Think about it. If your boss truly is stupid, he won't need your help appearing so. Having said that, the conversation that determines whether you get a promotion or get fired will take place when you are nowhere around. But, your boss will be.

Happy Bosses' Day.

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