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How to tame your nightmare boss

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Meryl Streep plays a nightmare boss in *The Devil Wears Prada* (Fox 2000 Pictures).

Jeanne Heying vividly remembers a nightmare boss she had at the Environmental Protection Agency 15 years ago. He would regularly fall asleep in staff meetings, then brush it off as “meditating,” she said. She recounts, one December he made the staff – 50 people with varying religious beliefs – all join hands in a circle and pray for a successful year. On another occasion he called Heying into his office and outlined his brand new plan for her workgroup, disregarding the solution the group had been working on diligently for a year. And he left Heying to break the news to her coworkers.

We’ve all had them: bosses who make you want to call in sick – every single day. Bad bosses can have a huge impact on our lives both in and out of the [office](http://www.bbc.com/capital/tags/workplace?lc=int_mb_1001) (http://www.bbc.com/capital/tags/workplace?lc=int_mb_1001). Studies have shown the pervasive negative effects of bad bosses, ranging from reducing junior employees’ productivity to causing staff to [quit](http://www.bbc.com/capital/story/20130613-should-i-quit?lc=int_mb_1001) (http://www.bbc.com/capital/story/20130613-should-i-quit?lc=int_mb_1001) more quickly. Bad bosses can even increase the [risk](http://www.bbc.com/capital/tags/risk?lc=int_mb_1001) (http://www.bbc.com/capital/tags/risk?lc=int_mb_1001) for heart disease.

**You are not a
comic book hero.
Don't attempt to
force the hand of
justice. — John Hoover**

But there are solutions and you can learn what to look for and avoid in future managers.

One-on-One

Trying to communicate to your manager what you are feeling is key, according to Joannah Griffin, a human resources manager at Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia. Most managers allow time for one-on-one meetings with team members, because they find this is the best way to address communication style or micromanagement problems.

“Communication creates open and honest dialogue which in this instance must be delivered with composure and in a [professional](http://www.bbc.com/capital/tags/careers?lc=int_mb_1001) environment,” she said in an email. Avoid being confrontational or attempting to do this in a group situation, advised Griffin. “Your manager may feel cornered and react defensively,” she wrote. “It’s important for employees to find the balance of being direct but avoid making negative comments.”

Of course, securing the opportunity to speak freely isn’t always possible. For Kevin Hu, the introduction of a new [boss](http://www.bbc.com/capital/columns/leader-board?lc=int_mb_1001) at the home appliance company where he works in Bangkok has meant nothing but headaches.

“[He is] totally not open to talking,” wrote Hu, who has tried on multiple occasions to tell his boss what he was feeling. The boss’s immediate response: “Don’t defend yourself,” according to Hu. “He likes to say ‘I know’ and doesn’t listen while we try to explain something to him.” Compounding the pain is the fact that Hu and his coworkers really liked their former boss, who happens to be a friend of the current one.

If you can’t go it alone...

One option for Hu would be to take up the issue discreetly and respectfully with his former and more likeable – and probably better – boss, suggested John Hoover, author of *How to Work for an Idiot* and a senior vice president at New York-based Partners in Human Resources International.

“The better boss might suggest to his successor that he reach out to HR for an executive coach or, perhaps, the former boss can directly mentor the latter and current boss.”

If the former boss isn’t open to this, it’s probably best to take it to the next level, according to Copenhagen-based international management consultant Henrik Ahlm.

“A bad manager can easily have a negative impact on the bottom line and not least the reputation of a company,” wrote Ahlm. So, it is important to share with human resources what is going on. “Top management cannot act correctly if they are not aware,” he wrote.

But this can also be a risky step, warned Harvey Hornstein, professor emeritus of psychology at Columbia University and author of *Brutal Bosses and Their Prey*. “If you don’t win that discussion, your boss is going to get you,” he said. “And even if you do win, you may end up with a reputation that no one else is going to take you on (as an employee).”

So, before escalating your complaints to higher management, quietly seek out other people’s advice and insights, suggested Hornstein. “If you’re being abused, it’s a pretty good bet that there are others who report to this boss or once did who know about the misbehaviour,” he said. “Just the catharsis and the opportunity to understand that others are or did suffer the way you are can often be relieving.”

You might even consider going to a good boss who is a peer or above your manager and asking for help, suggested Partners in Human Resources International’s Hoover.

“A positive and appreciative approach always sets a better stage upon which your drama can be played out,” wrote Hoover in an email. “What might the peer suggest that you and your colleagues do to help create a less hostile working environment? It is very likely that, if you stay on the high road, your boss’s peer might intervene or add leverage to your appeal with HR.”

Avoid the “he goes or I go” strategy

You don’t want to put management in a position where they have to admit they have made a hiring mistake.

“Corporations and other organizations have an unwritten and unspoken policy against admitting that they promoted someone into a position of institutional authority who is seriously in need of adult supervision,” wrote Hoover. Instead, you could take a job offer into a human resources meeting and say you really want to stay and keep contributing to the success of the firm. “Explain that you really want to stay but you need to move into another reporting relationship elsewhere in the company,” suggested Hoover. “You are not a comic book hero. Don’t attempt to force the hand of justice.”

Keep calm and carry on

“The key to dealing with a difficult boss is to stay calm, do not react when your buttons get pushed and clearly, calmly decide on the best response,” wrote Dr. Judith Orloff, assistant clinical professor of psychology at University of California Los Angeles. “Don’t panic or blurt out something you will regret later.”

If you have a narcissistic boss, keep your expectations realistic, according to Orloff. “It’s all about them,” she wrote in an email. “So if you frame solutions in terms of how something might benefit them you are more likely to get your needs met.”

Learn from their mistakes

Having a bad boss can make you appreciate the good ones – and also help you prepare for the next time you’re job hunting. The experience can also teach valuable lessons in how to take the lead on a project or manage your own team.

“I learned to stay away from crazy bosses, to speak my mind, and most of all to gauge where they were coming from,” said Heying.

Have you dealt with a bad boss? What was your strategy? Tell us all about it on our [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/BBCCapital) (<https://www.facebook.com/BBCCapital>) page. To comment on this or any story you have seen on BBC Capital, head over to our [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/BBCCapital) (<https://www.facebook.com/BBCCapital>) page or message us on [Twitter](https://twitter.com/BBC_Capital) (https://twitter.com/BBC_Capital).

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