

Standing Up to the Office Bully When the Bully Is Your Boss

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Editor's Note: Work Therapy is an online feature that answers readers' questions about managing workplace stress and anxiety. Send questions to worktherapy@wsj.com, and please indicate whether you would like your name associated with the question.

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Q: My workplace is part of a 24-hour, 365-days-a-week business in the gaming industry. My problem is that I work with a senior management executive who loves to put people down in front of others, including name calling. No one has stayed in my position for more than three months. They quit. But I don't want to let him get the best of me. To say the least, I am not a quitter. How do you think this situation should be handled?

A: In third grade, if the school bully made fun of you for wearing pink overalls and putting your hair in pigtails every day, your mom would have told you to stand up for yourself. She would have been right. But when the person tormenting you is your boss, it's much harder to tell him he's not allowed to talk to you like that. And if you do, it's possible he could start screaming at you even more frequently than he already does.

"Bullying in the workplace is particularly difficult to deal with because bullying is always about power," says Edward Dunkelblau, a psychologist based in Northbrook, Ill., who works with corporations on how to handle emotional outbursts in the office. "It's very hard to kill the goose that lays the golden egg. And if you do confront your boss, you could be fired."

Unlike standing up for yourself in the schoolyard, your first step here shouldn't be to challenge the bully. Instead, as Buddha-on-the-mountaintop as it sounds, try to block out his behavior. When he makes an offensive remark, instead of bristling and spending the rest of the day too angry to concentrate on your work, calm yourself immediately. Do this by excusing yourself to go the bathroom, getting a cup of coffee, or closing your eyes for a moment.

"You can recognize that this person has a problem," Dr. Dunkelblau says. "But it's not your problem, and you go on about your business. The worst thing to do is react to your impulses, which are either to run away or to smack them, and neither one is all that helpful."

It will also be helpful (although difficult) to look beyond your boss's foul mouth and try to figure out what good traits he has as a leader. You may learn that a better boss is lurking underneath that intimidating pose.

WORK THERAPY

Anxious that you're not doing a good job? Angry that your boss is taking credit for your work? Worried that a junior co-worker is going to leapfrog ahead of you? Write to worktherapy@wsj.com with your workplace stresses for tips on how to cope. Please indicate if you don't want to be identified. "Look at the bigger picture," says Louis Perrott, a psychologist based in Roanoke, Va., who advises businesses on building effective work teams and training managers. "It isn't acting like that that got this person into a leadership role. There must be redeeming qualities there."

If you can't ignore your boss's behavior and move on, one option is going to your human resources department. It's not necessarily about tattling on your boss. Rather, you want to find out about the harassment policies at your workplace and also see what options may exist for a different shift or transfer within the company.

Another option is to have a conversation with your boss about how his behavior is affecting your work. Don't envision this as a chance to hurl angry words back at him. That would be as naive as challenging Roger Federer to a game of tennis. In a fight with your boss, you are likely to lose.

"As opposed to challenging them, the conversation should be in the context of discussing some kind of business issue," says Dr. Perrott. "Say, 'When you ask me to do this this way, could you restate that differently?' Or, 'I'm not understanding where you're going with this when you do this. Could you say it another way?'"

Your boss may tell you to get over it. Which brings me to your declaration that you're not a quitter. If you were a yacht captain in the middle of a sail, this would be admirable. But it's a mistake to see ditching an abusive boss as a moral failing.

"There are bad bosses and bad jobs," says Fred Mael, a psychologist and organizational consultant who works with the American Institutes for Research, a nonprofit behavioral and social science research organization in Washington, D.C. "It doesn't reflect on you if you leave. If you're a capable person, there are plenty of good jobs." And plenty of bosses who don't demean their employees.

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