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The Washington Post

# Sunday Source

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SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 28, 2008

DC FN MG PG

**THREE WISE GUYS**

Joe Heim, Justin Rude and Dan Zak

*Three Prince Charmings  
Whose Knowledge Is Alarming\**

**Dear Wise Guys:**  
Why do toothbrush makers insist on making handles that are too fat? They don't fit into the holders that were made for them. Drives me nuts!  
— Frustrated in Chevy Chase

**Joe:** I feel your pain, CC. I've replaced my toothbrush holder four times in six months just to accommodate the growing size of toothbrush handles.

**Dan:** There's actually a free toothbrush whitening workshop in Capitol Hill this Thursday. Just show up with your oversize brush and get ready to pare that sucker down to size.

**Joe:** I'm almost certain that's not true. Anyway, I called the folks at Colgate about this, and they told me the large handles "are ergonomically designed to fit comfortably and snugly in the hand" and that "while there is no standard size for toothbrush holders, an increasing number of manufacturers make holders with larger holes."

**Justin:** That's corporate speak for "just deal with it."



BY DANNY HELLMAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

**Dear Wise Guys:**  
Considering that no one would know from firsthand experience, why is the prevailing premise in most popular science fiction literature, cinema and television programs that aliens are evil and want to do harm to earthlings?  
— Gort

**Dan:** If the aliens were friendly, there would be no conflict and, hence, no movie. Can you imagine if the alien in "Alien" had burst out of John Hurt's stomach and said, "My word, I'm terribly sorry. Let's get some gauze for this chap?"

**Joe:** I don't buy the premise of the question. Mork was a friendly alien. And so were E.T. and Alf. And how about Jerry Maguire?

**Justin:** Jerry Maguire wasn't an alien.  
**Joe:** No, but he was played by one.

**Dear Wise Guys:**  
If a cat's natural prey is small critters like mice and birds, how come they don't make mouse-flavored cat food?  
— Phil

**Joe:** Cats can kill mice and small birds on their own. What they can't do is fish or take down a cow in a pasture. For those evasive species, they rely on the goodness of pet food makers to supply them with an infinite variety of tasty treats in shiny packages.

**Justin:** And they no more want a steady diet of mouse-flavored food than you would want to eat only Hot Pockets.

**Dan:** I once baited a mousetrap with a bit of Hot Pocket. We never caught the mouse, but the rest of the Hot Pocket was delicious.

*A few weeks ago we answered a question about why deer that are killed by cars end up on the side of the road rather than in the middle. Reader Allyse Turner of Ijamsville in Frederick County wrote to offer her experience to explain this phenomenon:*

"Having hit a deer with our minivan over Easter (by accident; we were not trolling for a cheap dinner), I can tell you that most deer are on the side of the road because of the impact. The damage to the outside of the van looked relatively minor compared to the distance it sent the deer flying. It landed on the other side of the road in a ditch. It took the state trooper a little while to locate it. Two tons of moving steel is no match for [hundreds of] pounds of venison!"

\*This week's motto was submitted by Christina Yao.

Have a question only the Three Wise Guys can answer? Or a motto suggestion? Send it to [wiseguys@washpost.com](mailto:wiseguys@washpost.com) and await their words of wise-dom. For past columns, visit [www.washingtonpost.com/wiseguys](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wiseguys).



PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY MATT MAHURIN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

# You Think Your Boss Is Bad?

Some Managers Can't Manage. What to Do If You've Got a Boss Who Only Makes Things Worse.

By TARA SWORDS  
Special to The Washington Post

Maybe your co-workers are friendly and caring. Maybe your company's mission stirs your passions. Maybe you bring home a fat paycheck for a predictable 40 hours a week. Still, it can take just one sour ingredient to turn your occupational utopia into a recurring nightmare: a jerk for a boss.

Bad bosses run the gamut from meek and uninspiring to unethical and even psychologically abusive. But all bad bosses have one thing in common, says Steve Miranda of the Alexandria-based Society for Human Resource Management.

"Bad bosses are energy vampires," he says. "When employees interact with them, they literally come away from that interaction feeling more drained, worse and less energized."

The No. 1 reason people leave jobs is because they work for bosses they don't respect and who don't inspire employees to reach their potential, says Miranda, who serves as chief human resource, strategic planning and diversity officer for the society.

For most people, job success partly defines self-worth. So a boss who disparages instead of encourages not only damages productivity, Miranda says, but also casts a long, dark shadow on morale.

"A friend of mine called it the shame spiral,"

See BAD BOSSES, N4, Col. 1

# 4 Stories of Terrible Bosses and How to Deal With Them

BAD BOSSES, From N1

says Katy, a 36-year-old Rockville resident who found herself in a work environment she describes as filled with interoffice affairs, racist comments and other inappropriate behavior, often condoned, if not spearheaded, by the boss. "You start thinking, 'I must have done something. How is this happening to me?'"

We asked four people to share their experiences with bad bosses. We have identified them by their first names only so that they could speak freely about the problems they faced.

Some of these situations took place several years ago, but the memories are still painful. Nevertheless, the four agreed to dredge up their recollections in hopes that others might find some nugget of wisdom about dealing with their own energy vampires — and how to know when it's time to cut and run from a jerk.

## The Boss's Way or the Highway

Maybe the boss isn't Dr. Evil, but he does want an army of Mini-Mes. He wants things done his way, and he doesn't trust employees to do it their way.

"Some people are great at delegating details but not authority," says Mo Fathelbab, president of Alexandria-based Forum Resources Network and author of "Forum: The Secret Advantage of Successful Leaders." Letting go of authority and trusting employees, Fathelbab says, is a big challenge because the boss is no longer in control. "And when they're not in control, they're not comfortable in their own skin."

When Tammy took a public relations job at a D.C. hospitality business, she tried to be proactive by suggesting fresh ideas. But the boss criticized her way of working, yelled at her, accused her of negativity and faulted her for her 8-to-6 schedule.

"He was nitpicking every single thing I was doing," says Tammy, who's now 39 and lives in Alexandria. She knew he clearly wanted things done his way, but he was also vague about what his way entailed. She tried consulting with him. "I went back and said, 'I just want to make sure I have this right.' But if I didn't, that would fire him up."

Eventually, Tammy's boss put her on probation. He gave her three months to fix the problems, but Tammy says he never made clear what those problems were. She felt blindsided.

"In every position I've ever had, I've always had a great relationship with [bosses]," Tammy says. "I've always received accolades from the people I've worked with and for."

Tammy says she could have enlisted the help of human resources but feared being blacklisted or seen as a complainer. Her health bore the brunt of her stress.

"It had gotten to a point that I couldn't even brush my teeth in the morning without gagging," she says. "I have never been that upset about going into work ever before. I ended up losing 17 pounds, and I'm not a very big person to begin with."

Tammy thought her personality didn't jell with her boss's more aggressive style. In these situations, Miranda recommends that employees ask the HR department to administer personality profiling tests such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or the Predictive Index.

"Things come to the surface" in these tests, Miranda says. "Employees and the boss look at each other and say, 'Oh, that's why we're having this problem.' What starts off as an adversarial relationship moves into something more positive."

Tammy was interviewing for new jobs when her boss moved to a different city. Her probation ended, and she got a new manager who trusts her to do her job well — and she has thrived at the company ever since.

"The sky opened up. Things got clear again," Tammy says. "I love what I do."

## Inappropriate to the Extreme

On TV's "The Office," boss Michael Scott is an endless source of outrageously inappropriate comments and behavior. The character is funny and sometimes even lovable. But in real life, such a boss can alienate employees and create a toxic environment.

When Katy, the Rockville resident, took a job planning events for a D.C.-based nonprofit organization, she joined a tiny department with an established culture in which nothing seemed off-limits. Katy remembers hearing the boss fight with her husband on the phone — the same boss who she says was having a romantic affair with a co-worker.

Katy was uncomfortable because her boss condoned an environment in which racist and sexual comments were acceptable, but the only person Katy felt she could approach for help had been sexually involved with the boss.

If there's any hope of resolving this sort of problem, it's best done with classic "I" phrases, Miranda says. Don't accuse the boss of bad behavior, but say how the behavior makes you feel. The boss will either apologize or be indifferent to your concern, at which point you'll know how to proceed.

"Some people are more than willing to change," Miranda says. "Other people, quite frankly, are jerks. And employees need to vote with their feet."

Katy says she took suggestions for improving the workplace to her boss but nothing changed. She ultimately



GETTY IMAGES

BAD BOSSES RUN THE GAMUT FROM MEEK AND UNINSPIRING TO UNETHICAL AND EVEN PSYCHOLOGICALLY ABUSIVE.

mately filed a grievance and hired a lawyer after her boss falsified performance-related information in Katy's file. She began documenting her boss's actions in hopes of getting the boss reprimanded, or at least getting herself transferred, but she only felt worse.

"I had migraines. I felt sick to my stomach," Katy says. "I used all of my sick leave just because it was so horrible."

In the end, she did vote with her feet and resigned before her grievance was resolved.

"It was so bad that I left before I vested in the pension," she says. "It was worth it to leave and give up that money rather than stay and be around those people."

## The Silent Treatment

When Dawn took a job with an Alexandria nonprofit group in 1991, she was a recent college graduate eager to build a career in communications. She loved the

organization's mission and had completed a successful project there as a consultant. The environment fostered discipline and teamwork, and Dawn had a good working relationship with the boss. But when Dawn became an employee, the boss's behavior changed.

"It became a command-and-control environment," says Dawn, who now lives in San Francisco. The boss "was constantly over my shoulder. She'd occasionally listen to my phone calls. I was forbidden from having conversations with board members. I was seeing a dynamic that was really counter-productive to the organization."

Dawn says she thought the boss had confidence in her abilities, which made the dynamic all the more confusing. And, eventually, there was no hope

of clearing up the confusion after the boss stopped communicating altogether.

"I'd come in the office, and she wouldn't even look up," Dawn says. "In a small office with only three people, it's a little awkward."

Fathelbab says the situation reminds him of a place where he worked years ago. "This was the boss's style of saying, 'I'm going to punish you, but I can't do it verbally.'" In such cases, he says, it's critical to restart the communication. A 360-degree evaluation system, in which everyone reviews the people they work with and for, can uncover the problem and get people talking about how to solve it.

For Dawn, the lack of communication reached a head one day when she borrowed a friend's car to drive to work and her boss had it towed from the company lot. "As opposed to walking in the office and just asking, 'Is that anybody's car?' she made a decision to call a tow truck and have the car removed," Dawn says. "Hours later she said, 'I didn't know that was yours.' She offered no recourse, no reimbursement, no help to drive me down to get it."

At review time, Dawn and her boss agreed on the need to communicate better. But Dawn felt they were going through the motions.

Dawn eventually moved on with a valuable lesson: how not to behave as a manager.

"I knew I didn't want to be anything like that person," she says. "When you're young, sometimes you can get caught up in insecurities trying to please your boss. But when I feel a little insecure or feel paranoia creeping in, I address that internally rather than project that on anybody else."

Since that job, Dawn has managed many people and worked in companies of varying sizes. She says she learned from that early experience that it's helpful to address problems immediately. But it was a hard-won lesson.

"It's so funny: As I start to remember this stuff, I get the same anxious feeling I had," Dawn says. "I internalized so much."

## Bullying and Intimidation

When Bethesda resident Tash took a job at a grocery store deli in her native Australia, she was just 17. She and her boss had agreed that she would work 12 hours each week. But the boss soon pressured her to take on more shifts, often with only a few hours' notice.

"She would say that if I didn't come do this shift, she would cancel everything I had that week," says Tash, now 22. "I was in high school, and I wasn't as self-assured as I should have been, and she probably capitalized on that."

Tash eventually decided to assert herself, with some success. The boss gave her fewer hours but didn't cancel all of her shifts as threatened. Tash belonged to a union and today says she thinks it might have helped to bring the situation to the union's attention.

"I was too scared to talk to anyone," she says. "I think you get paid less, so people assume they can treat you badly — or you assume they can treat you badly."

Fathelbab says standing up for yourself can be scary but worth it.

"The bullying personality will keep bullying until at some point in time you stand up and say, 'I'm not going to take it anymore,'" Fathelbab says. "It might work. It might not work, and that means you might have a better future somewhere else."

Ultimately, enough people complained about the boss that she was transferred to a different location. "After that, it kind of made the whole staff feel unified," Tash says.

## Be Fair, Then Firm

Experts say it's good to remember that today's managers have a lot of responsibilities: increasing revenue, keeping customers happy, managing a diverse workforce that comprises four generations of people who are motivated and fulfilled differently. A little empathy for the boss can't hurt.

But when you conjure up all of your objectivity and empathy and still think the boss is in the wrong — and your attempts at resolution are fruitless — it's time to go.

"If you have a mediator, go to them," Katy says. "Try, but realize that it's not always going to work."

**Have more questions** about bad bosses and what to do about them? Join Washington Post workplace columnist Mary Ellen Slayter for her Career Track discussion Monday at 2 p.m. at [www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com).

## Maybe (Gulp) The Problem Is You

Just about everybody has had a bad boss. But do you find yourself constantly working for people you don't get along with?

"Every dysfunctional relationship we've ever been in has one thing in common: us," says Steve Miranda of the Society for Human Resource Management. "Really be honest with yourself and ask, 'Is the problem with the boss, or is the problem with me?'"

Jack Yoest, president of Management Training of DC, takes a harder line on the boss-employee relationship and says it's the employee's job to relieve the boss's anxieties, not the other way around.

"If you have a nervous, micromanaging boss who's always in your hair, he probably doesn't trust you," Yoest says. "The employee hasn't sold the boss on his ability to get anything done, and I'd say, most of the time, it's the employee's fault."

You might not agree with that. But if your boss does, he or she will expect you to behave accordingly.

Yoest says most people haven't been taught the mechanics of being a good employee. Rather than insisting that managers empower employees, Yoest urges employees to convince the boss that they are dependable and can act as the boss would. The goal should be to go from an employee who does nothing unless told, or who is always asking the boss what to do, to an employee who recommends a course of action and, after gaining the boss's trust, acts on the boss's behalf.

"When you've reached that level, you're at a whole new level of job security" because you're behaving like a leader, Yoest says. And that puts you one step closer to being the leader.



Jack Yoest says many people haven't learned how to be good workers.

— Tara Swords



BY PAUL DRINKWATER — NBC VIA REUTERS

Michael Scott (played by Steve Carell) may be entertaining on TV, but you wouldn't want him for a boss in real life.