

## How to Deal with a Boss Who Stresses You Out

By Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic

Discussions of leadership tend to focus on its positive outcomes, such as [innovation](#), [employee engagement](#) or [organizational performance](#). However, for the majority of employees, the leaders in their organizations are a source of stress rather than inspiration. Indeed, for every transformational leader and emotionally intelligent manager out there, there are dozens of toxic bosses, and they come in many different forms. Barbara Kellerman at Harvard University has devoted a great deal of her career to studying problematic leaders. She identified [seven major types](#): (1) incompetent, (2) rigid, (3) intemperate, (4) callous, (5) corrupt, (6) insular, and (7) evil. What all these types have in common is their ability to induce stress in others, particularly their subordinates. Unsurprisingly, research shows that the experience of having a bad boss can be akin to [post-traumatic stress disorder](#).

Since bad bosses are ubiquitous, it is hard to avoid them. The best way to deal with one would of course be to leave them, but the next one may be equally bad, or even worse. Sometimes the devil you know is better than the devil you don't know. And while self-employment is tempting — it is much harder to complain about the boss when the boss is you — people who work for themselves tend to [work longer hours only to earn less](#), and make a smaller contribution to the wider economy than when they're employed by an organization.

What, then, is the best way to deal with a stress-inducing boss? Although there is no universal formula, here are three simple recommendations that generally help:

*Get inside their mind:* No matter how bad your boss is, they are probably consistent. Learn to predict their behavioral patterns, and they will become a much smaller problem. The Norwegians say, “There is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothes.” This pragmatic approach can also be applied to dealing with one's boss: once you figure out what they are like, there is no excuse for being unprepared. Much like the *weather*, your manager's moods will fluctuate on a daily basis, but their personality will show clearly defined patterns, just like any *climate*. Focus especially on decoding your manager's dark side — the undesirable or maladaptive aspects of their personality that harm their ability to build and maintain a high-performing team and engage their staff. Scientific meta-analyses show that there are [11 derailers](#) managers can exhibit – 54% have at least three, but it is possible for managers to have all 11. While these derailers are best assessed via [data-driven tools](#), it is hard to force your boss to take a psychometric assessment, and, alas, most managers don't share their [results](#) with their teams. The information below may help you infer your manager's derailers, and how to deal with them.

Derailing trait: Excitable

Behavioral manifestations: Intense mood swings, volatility, over-the-top emotional reactions, throwing fits, bullying, harassing.

Coping strategies for employees: De-escalate, stay calm, wait for the storm to pass (it will).

Derailing trait: Skeptical

Behavioral manifestations: Inability to trust, extreme cynicism, defiance, retaliation  
thirst, paranoid attitude.

Coping strategies for employees: Use data-driven arguments, don't question them, and don't expect them to trust you.

Derailing trait: Cautious

Behavioral manifestations: Fear of criticism, risk-aversion, "analysis paralysis",  
reluctance to embrace opportunities, anti-innovation bias.

Coping strategies for employees: Follow process, move slowly, and don't break things. If you want to influence them, sticks work better than carrots.

Derailing trait: Reserved

Behavioral manifestations: Disinterested in others and their feelings, inability to  
communicate, inexpressiveness (hard to read, poker face).

Coping strategies for employees: Communicate via e-mail rather than face-to-face, don't put them on the spot, respect their privacy.

Derailing trait: Leisurely

Behavioral manifestations: Stubbornness, conflict avoidance, passive aggressiveness,  
passive resistance, uncooperativeness.

Coping strategies for employees: Don't push them, don't assume they agree with you or will help you, even when they seem positive (it's probably fake).

Derailing trait: Bold

Behavioral manifestations: Arrogance, entitlement, narcissism, and an inability to accept  
mistakes.

Coping strategies for employees: Praise them and validate their egos; don't belittle or blame them, particularly in public.

Derailing trait: Mischievous

Behavioral manifestations: Manipulative charm, reckless risk-taking, boredom,  
impulsivity.

Coping strategies for employees: Play politics, gossip, and have fun with them — but be careful.

Derailing trait: Colorful

Behavioral manifestations: Melodrama, exhibitionism, attention seeking, and lack of  
focus.

Coping strategies for employees: Be a loyal spectator, let them entertain you; don't compete with them for the spotlight.

Derailing trait: Imaginative

Behavioral manifestations: Eccentricity, un-pragmatic originality, unfeasible visions, wacky ideas.

Coping strategies for employees: Be enthusiastic about their ideas, focus on the big picture, and be ready to execute or pick up the pieces.

Derailing trait: Diligent

Behavioral manifestations: Obsessive, micro-managing, impossible standards, counterproductive perfectionism.

Coping strategies for employees: Don't be careless, pay attention to quality, maintain high standards.

Derailing trait: Dutiful

Behavioral manifestations: Eagerness to please authority and manage upwards, putting subordinates last.

Coping strategies for employees: Be rule-abiding, loyal, and help them please their own bosses.

*Don't be a source of stress yourself:* Every manager has a bright side, and even the worst boss in the world will be able to display some positive qualities some of the time. However, stress tends to bring out a manager's dark side. Indeed, the above derailers will be much more likely to emerge when managers are under pressure, or in any situation where they are not proactively managing their reputation. Thus, don't make things worse by being a source of stress yourself. If you annoy or upset your manager, or the work you produce is unacceptable, you can expect the worst aspects of their personality to emerge, turning into a source of stress for you. Unsurprisingly, regardless of the job and industry, managers tend to promote employees who are [rewarding to deal with](#). This explains the career-related importance of [emotional intelligence](#) (EQ), and why employees who have none are often in trouble even if they are talented and hard-working. Regardless of your own level of EQ, you can become a less stress-inducing and more soothing influence on your boss by taming your own derailers.

*Make your boss look good:* Finally, remember to get some leverage. Make yourself indispensable to your boss, and ensure that s/he looks better with you on board. As Ben Dattner illustrated in his book, *Credit and Blame at Work*, many managers succeed in their careers not because of their leadership talent, but due to their ability to take credit for others' achievements and blame others for their own mistakes. No matter how stress-inducing your boss might be, and how good you become at coping with their dark side, the only way to ensure you remain on their good side is by being a valuable resource to them. Nobody wants to bite the hand that feeds them. However, even if you make your manager's life easier, be sure to keep that a secret. The ideal situation for a boss like this is that you are not just a critical asset, but also a well-kept secret. If they see that everyone is aware of your value, they will be concerned that you may sooner or later leave them, take credit for their achievements, or even take their job. At the early stages of your career, your success is mainly a function of managing the dark side of your boss;

at the later stages your success will mostly depend on managing your own dark side, especially if you are interested in being an effective leader.

---

[Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic](#) is the Chief Talent Scientist at ManpowerGroup, a professor of business psychology at University College London and at Columbia University, and an associate at Harvard's Entrepreneurial Finance Lab. His latest book is *[The Talent Delusion: Why Data, Not Intuition, Is the Key to Unlocking Human Potential](#)*. Find him on Twitter: [@drtcp](#) or at [www.drmascp.com](http://www.drmascp.com).