

A Survival Guide  
for **Working** with  
**BAD**  
**BOSSES**

Dealing with Bullies, Idiots,  
Back-Stabbers, and Other  
**MANAGERS FROM HELL**

Gini Graham Scott, Ph.D.

A **Survival Guide** for  
Working with  
**Bad Bosses**

This page intentionally left blank

# A Survival Guide for Working with **Bad Bosses**

**Dealing with Bullies, Idiots, Back-Stabbers,  
and Other Managers from Hell**

**Gini Graham Scott, Ph.D.**

**AMACOM**

American Management Association

New York • Atlanta • Brussels • Chicago • Mexico City • San Francisco  
Shanghai • Tokyo • Toronto • Washington, D.C.

*Special discounts on bulk quantities of AMACOM books are available to corporations, professional associations, and other organizations. For details, contact Special Sales Department, AMACOM, a division of American Management Association, 1601 Broadway, New York, NY 10019. Tel.: 212-903-8316. Fax: 212-903-8083. Web Site: [www.amacombooks.org](http://www.amacombooks.org)*

*This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information in regard to the subject matter covered. It is sold with the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering legal, accounting, or other professional service. If legal advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional person should be sought.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

*Scott, Gini Graham.*

*A survival guide for working with bad bosses : dealing with bullies, idiots, back-stabbers, and other managers from hell / Gini Graham Scott.*

*p. cm.*

*Includes index.*

*ISBN 0-8144-7298-2*

*1. Managing your boss. 2. Interpersonal relations. 3. Conflict management. 4. Interpersonal conflict. 5. Interpersonal communication. I. Title.*

*HF5548.83.S365 2005*

*650.1'3—dc22*

2005015769

*© 2006 Gini Graham Scott, Ph.D.*

*All rights reserved.*

*Printed in the United States of America.*

*This publication may not be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in whole or in part, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of AMACOM, a division of American Management Association, 1601 Broadway, New York, NY 10019.*

*Printing number*

*10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1*

**Dedicated to:**

All the bad bosses I and others  
have had—without whom  
this book wouldn't have been possible

This page intentionally left blank

# Contents

Introduction	ix
<b>Part I: Not Fit for Command</b>	<b>1</b>
1. The No-Boss Boss	3
2. The Pass-the-Buck Boss	9
3. Clueless but Connected	14
4. Scatterboss	18
5. Critically Clueless	22
6. The Dishonest “Genius”	27
<b>Part II: That’s Unfair!</b>	<b>33</b>
7. On Overload	35
8. Only Good Enough to Train Others	40
9. No Backup	44
10. No Excuses	48
11. That’s Perfect—Not!	52
12. Promises, Promises	58
13. No Trust	63
14. You’re Great, But . . .	68
<b>Part III: Power Players</b>	<b>73</b>
15. Just for Sport	75

16. Turning Yeses into No's	79
17. The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing	84
18. Controlling the Control Freak	89
19. Bad Boss in a Big Bureaucracy	93
20. Breaking Through the Bureaucracy	97
21. It Goes with the Territory	102
22. Who's the Boss?	107
<b>Part IV: Out of Bounds</b>	<b>113</b>
23. Dirty Looks	115
24. A New Boss Is Insulting and Abusive	120
25. Call 911	125
26. Drunk, Disorderly, and Untouchable	129
27. The Intrusive Boss	134
28. Party Planner	139
29. Cultural Divide	143
<b>Part V: Ethical Challenges</b>	<b>147</b>
30. Dealing with Danger	149
31. The Cover-Up	154
32. It's a Crime!	158
33. Sex and Faxes	165
34. Give In to Collective Denial or Leave?	169
<b>Part VI: Putting It All Together</b>	<b>175</b>
35. Bad Boss or Bad Employee?	177
36. How Bad Is Your Boss? An Assessment Quiz	182
37. Knowing How to Deal	187
Index	205
About the Author	209

# Introduction

Virtually everyone has had some bad bosses over the course of their career, from the first job during or after high school to the present. In some cases, these bosses are aware they are “bad.” In other cases, bosses may think they are great and don’t have a clue what others think of them. You have hard-driving tyrants who measure success on the employee’s productivity and don’t give a fig if employees like them or are happy; for them the bottom line is all that matters. At the other extreme, bosses can be bad because they are so concerned with being liked, with being one of the gang, that they have problems with authority and control. When they spend all that time schmoozing with their employees, little gets done. They may be well-liked as a sympathetic, understanding friend, but that alone doesn’t make a good boss.

So what is a “bad” boss? Essentially, any boss who is difficult and hard to deal with or who has trouble directing and guiding employees to effectively do the work can qualify as a bad boss. For example, such a boss might be incompetent, give unclear instructions, blame others, take undue credit, be high-strung and hyper, be disorganized, act like a power mad tyrant, or any combination of such characteristics. And in today’s highly competitive, high-stress environment where a growing number of jobs are being outsourced and loyalty to a particular job or company is a thing of the past, the

pressure and stresses that contribute to bad “bosshood” and difficult employer–employee relationships are more difficult than ever.

While the assessment of “badness” can be made more objectively by the boss’s own boss, for employees, the subjective measure—what they think of the boss—is what counts. It’s this latter approach we will take in this book, looking at what makes someone a bad boss and analyzing what can be done about it.

*A Survival Guide to Working with Bad Bosses* draws on real-life stories I have learned of in the course of consulting, conducting workshops and seminars, writing columns and books, and just talking to people about their experiences in the workplace. Each chapter uses a mix of problem-solving and conflict-resolution techniques, along with methods such as visualization, analytical reasoning, and intuitive assessment. In the end, the most important tool you have at your disposal is your common sense. You’ll find that being straightforward and open where you can be, and otherwise playing your cards strategically and close to the vest, will produce the best results.

Since your livelihood depends in large part upon your relationship with your boss, you may find there are times when it’s best to follow instructions and back off from stating exactly what you think. But on other occasions, you may do better to stand up for what you believe, even if it means possibly losing your job. An example might be if a bad boss asks you to do something illegal or unethical. Or perhaps a stealthier approach might be in order; there may be a way to expose your bad boss without getting stomped on yourself.

The best approach to use in a particular situation depends very much upon the circumstances. The ideal is to find a balanced solution that will allow for the greatest chance for success. You need to figure out when to follow the rules and when to bend or break them; when to be forceful and aggressive and when to back down; and when to act on your own and when to seek out alliances with other employees to negotiate with your boss together for the most satisfying solution.

However, while seeking that balance, it’s important to recognize that no one approach or solution fits all. You have to adapt them not only to the situation, but also to your own style and personality, as well as that of your boss. And you have to consider if this is a problem that affects others or many others in the office or if it primarily affects you, which may make the difference in whether to seek a

group or individual solution. Also, different principles, strategies, and tactics will work best for you at different times based on what's going on at the company, or even how your boss is feeling on a particular day.

Consider these chapters to be a series of recipes for better ways to deal with a buffet or smorgasbord of bad bosses. In keeping with this recipe approach, each chapter features the following ingredients:

- An introductory paragraph highlighting the problem.
- A short story or two about one or more people who faced this type of boss (with their identities, companies, and bosses concealed).
- A quiz with a list of possible responses, so you can think about what you might do in a given situation. You can even use this as a game to discuss this issue with others and compare your responses.
- A discussion of how these employees chose to respond to their bad boss or how they might respond.
- A series of three or more take-aways to highlight the chapter's key points.

As you read about how other people have dealt with bad bosses, you might think about how you can apply these strategies yourself or use them to advise a friend or colleague with a bad boss.

I hope you enjoy this survival guide, and I hope it helps you to improve your situation at work. Read on and meet the many different breeds of bad bosses, those varied species of wildlife in the office zoo. Feel free to explore and visit these different boss species in any order, and as you do, think about what you can learn about how to deal with your boss. Think of yourself as a kind of "boss keeper": The more skilled you are, the higher your "boss keeper" score (your BKS for short), and the more tractable, pleasant, and helpful your boss will be.

If you have your own questions, feel free to visit my website at [www.badbosses.net](http://www.badbosses.net) and send them to me.

This page intentionally left blank

Part I



# Not Fit for Command

This page intentionally left blank



# 1 The No-Boss Boss

One of the most frustrating kinds of bad bosses is the boss who really isn't there: the "no-boss boss." This is the opposite of the overly aggressive, controlling, or micromanaging boss. It's the boss who manages by not managing; the leader who leads by not leading. This boss often does not make decisions and lets things ride until someone else has to make the decision. He's a boss who often does not know what is going on and depends on subordinates to know. In short, this boss may have the title, but in fact has left the ship rudderless or without a captain. As a result, management and leadership by default fall onto the employees. But this is not the same as a self-managed team, where team members have a clear idea of what they are doing, know who's in charge, understand the limits of their authority, and set their goals and tasks to get there. Instead, there is more of a sense of muddling along and filling in because the boss's lack of management has created a leadership vacuum.

How does a boss end up in or continue in this position? One common way is when a person with technical expertise gets promoted into management, yet is still making a good technical contribution. The person may even continue to be supported by upper-level management because of his contributions as a technical expert. As long as the boss has an assistant or other employees who can pick up the management/leadership slack, the situation can continue.

Yet, while some employees might welcome the freedom and autonomy of a boss who is missing in action, this situation often leaves employees frustrated and uncertain about what's going on. Additionally, some nonmanagerial employees taking on the management role might come to feel resentment and think they are underpaid, since they have in fact become the managers.

That's what happened to Corinne, who worked as an assistant to such a boss at a large company that created software for games. In her division, about 40 employees worked on software development. Her boss, Ben, reported to one of two company vice presidents. Though Corrine had been in her job for three years, she found it frustrating because Ben made no decisions. Corrine described Ben this way: "He's basically involved in his own little world, doing his own projects, creating his own programs. But he doesn't make any decisions or manage anything. If I or someone else goes to him with an idea, he'll say go with it. Or if there is some dissension or problem in the office, he'll put his head in the sand and keep working on his own thing, which involves programming and coding. I've mostly taken up the slack, and people come to me all the time to make decisions. Ben tells me to go ahead and do whatever I think is best. But it's really frustrating."

As an example, the company had a big meeting about a pending deal to acquire a large slot machine company. The other company's software division was much larger, with about 100 employees, so there was some question about who would end up running the division and whether there might be some company layoffs. But instead of talking about the pending deal, the meeting turned into a sales powwow about the new products the company would now be selling. Afterward, "everyone in our department went ballistic," Corrine recalls. "They were concerned about such things as, 'What's happening to my job?' and 'What'll happen to my 401(k)?' So about a dozen people came to me to find out, and we all went together to see Ben to find out what's going on. His answer was, 'I don't know.' He didn't even know what the meeting would be about before we went. I told him he would have to find some answers for everyone. But all he did was call up the VP, who's his supervisor, and tell him, 'You've got a problem. You have to talk to everyone and calm them down.' So essentially, he just dropped the problem in his supervisor's lap, and the VP called me to arrange for a meeting, which I did."

In most other cases, Ben simply rubber-stamped everyday decisions that Corrine made herself. Typically, his input would be, "That's fine. That's a good idea." And Corrine would go ahead and do it.

The office operated this way for three years, with Ben essentially taking a hands-off approach to management while Corrine filled in the gaps. Perhaps she should have been aware that such an arrangement might be the case when Ben first hired her. He had just been hired from another company, and he told Corrine her job would be to run the office. Although she didn't know a lot of the technical terms for the software products being developed, Ben left it to her to pick up whatever she needed to know on her own. He also left it largely up to her to figure out what her job should be and left her alone to do whatever it was, with little idea about or interest in what that might be. After Corrine was there for several months, Ben asked her to make a list of what she did. When she turned in a four-page list of job activities, he looked at her list in amazement, and said: "Damn. I didn't know you did all that. Keep up the good work." Then he went back to work on one of his projects.

While Ben had an open-door policy and invited Corrine or any employee to come to see him, the discussions had relatively little effect. According to Corrine, "He knows what we would all like: some more direction or guidance from him. But he doesn't do that. He can't make a decision and doesn't know what's going on himself."

So by default, people in the office came to Corrine for direction and she took over the management role. The situation dragged on for several years. Though Corrine tried several times to get out of that position and be promoted into management or work directly for the vice president, he didn't want to make any changes. Corrine got additional raises for staying where she was, so she was very well paid as an administrative assistant. The vice president told her, "You're the glue that holds everything together." So he wanted her to keep doing what she had been doing, rather than promoting her.

Despite feelings of frustration for herself and the other employees in the department, Corrine continued to accept the status quo and planned to ride out the upcoming merger. The vice president assured her she would still "fit in." Also, she suspected that Ben wouldn't make it through the merger, so another higher-level posi-

tion might be in the cards for the future. For now, though, there was too much uncertainty to know. So Corrine decided to play a waiting game to see how it would “all shake out” over the next few months.

## What Should Corrine Do?

In Corrine’s place, what would you do and why? What do you think the outcomes of these different options would be? Here are some possibilities:

- Insist on getting a higher management title, not just more money, if you are going to be taking on a management role.
- Continue to make the decisions and don’t worry about keeping Ben informed unless he asks, since he will generally rubber-stamp whatever you do.
- Reassure others in the department that you will be making most of the decisions, so they don’t feel confused and frustrated.
- Don’t be concerned about not knowing the technical details of the work because many managers are hired for their skill in managing people, not their technical knowledge.
- Since the vice president feels your role in keeping the department going is critical, be firm when you ask to be transferred into another position. He will realize he needs to do this, or you will leave.
- Keep doing what you are doing and wait for the merger, since you will probably be staying on and Ben will be gone. Then you can figure out what to do.
- Gather others from the department to join you and schedule a meeting with Ben to emphasize that you need him to provide more direction, decisions, and information, so the department will be more productive, and people will better understand and feel more committed to what they are doing.

In this case, you would probably do well to keep doing what you are doing, but learn to be more accepting so you feel comfortable with the situation. It seems clear that Ben really is not suited to or capable of being a good manager. He is a technical expert; this is what he

likes to do and is good at, and he does not have the kind of people and managerial or leadership skills need for good management.

After a couple of years of this arrangement, it doesn't seem that it will be productive to talk to him about doing anything any differently. Ben probably can't or doesn't want to change, so there's no use trying. At the same time, the office seems to be thriving under your leadership, even though people are frustrated and confused by the lack of clarity. Thus, it might be good to clarify with others in the department what you are doing, so they expect to come to you for answers and decisions. It may be less necessary to include Ben in the loop on many of these decisions, since he doesn't seem to know or care about what is going on. Then you and everyone else might be less frustrated, and Ben may welcome the freedom from many day-to-day management activities. Perhaps you could tell him from time to time what you are doing, and point out that you thought this arrangement would help to relieve him of many responsibilities so he can focus on his projects. That way he at least will feel included and not pushed out. As you tell him about different decisions you are making and activities in the office, you can get a sense of how much he needs to know and either cut back on what you are telling him or tell him more.

As for the management title, you may have to let that go for the time being, since the vice president seems inclined to trust you to do the job but doesn't want to rock the boat. At the same time, you have been getting extra pay to compensate for your additional responsibilities. Once the merger is finalized, this may be the time to push for a formal promotion into a management position that reflects what you are actually doing. And there's no need to worry about knowing the technicalities of software development and coding, since you have 40 people in the department who know about those things. What they need from you are your management and leadership skills, not your knowledge about software.

In short, it would seem like a win-win situation for everyone if you were to continue taking over the management/leadership vacuum left by Ben's lack of interest in this role. Make it clearer to the other employees and yourself that this is what you are doing, and you will feel less frustrated and uncertain about what you are doing yourself. As long as upper management knows what is going on and