



Promote Workplace Civility by Managing Yourself

Skills and Professional Development



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Have you ever encountered a nasty boss? You know who I mean. The kind of arrogant, thoughtless jerk who occasionally exhibits unsavory characteristics to his or her employees. These bosses are disrespectful, dishonest, mean, thoughtless, self-centered, selfish, and unethical. They feel free to indulge their temper, raise their voices, use sarcasm as a coaching technique, interrupt you before you can finish a sentence, and refuse to care about the well-being of anyone but themselves. They kiss up to their superiors, take credit for your work, and rarely, if ever, utter the words “thank you.”

If you are not self-employed and you have never encountered a nasty boss in your company, please call the Guinness World Records to make sure your firm gets recognized as history’s first to have decent and respectful leaders across the board. For those of you who are not it this camp, I’ve got another question: “Why are there so many nasty bosses?” How could so many self-serving individuals who are apathetic, two-faced, and just plain mean ever earn the trust and respect required to be elevated into a position of power? This is not an easy question. Presumably, prior to their promotion, every jerky boss that roams the earth today convinced someone at some point that they were leadership material. That suggests that they were either especially talented at managing upward or, perhaps, they were not always jerks. Instead, their unappealing nature may have arisen only after they were put in charge of others.

This latter theory is one recently advanced by Dacher Keltner in the October issue of the *Harvard Business Review*. In his article entitled “Managing Yourself Don’t Let Power Corrupt You,” Keltner

asserts that his research has uncovered a disturbing pattern:

“While people usually gain power through traits and actions that advance the interests of others, such as empathy, collaboration, openness, fairness, and sharing; when they start to feel powerful or enjoy a position of privilege, those qualities begin to fade. The powerful are more likely than other people to engage in rude, selfish, and unethical behavior.”

This is a powerful observation that offers an explanation for the ubiquity of nasty bosses in the workplace. It also compels conscientious business professionals to ask: “If we all tend to become jerks when we assume leadership positions, what can we do about it?”

There is a lot riding on the answer to this question. Nasty bosses are responsible for untold suffering, and a significant loss in productivity. They destroy morale, wreck teamwork, distract employees from their work, and cause the best and the brightest to flee. In addition to the fact that disrespectful behavior is itself misconduct, nasty bosses create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation that is ripe for fraud and corrupt business practices.

Fortunately, there are several steps that you can take to minimize the number of nasty bosses in your firm. Here are some suggestions:

- Expressly take into consideration the character of individuals before you hire or promote them. This won't guarantee that they'll be saintly leaders, but it may reduce the odds that your workplace will be ruled by jerks.
- Set clear standards of conduct for your leaders that specifically mandate that they treat everyone with respect.
- Perform routine 360-degree performance reviews of your managers and hold all leaders accountable for how they treat their subordinates and colleagues.
- Speak up when you see bosses abusing others, confront the bullies, and teach others to do the same.
- Swiftly terminate or demote those who prove unworthy of leadership positions, regardless of the short-term impact on the business.

Regardless of whether you are in a position to execute any of these recommendations, there is one step you can and must take to prevent nasty bosses from taking root in your firm: Don't become one yourself.

If Keltner's research is correct, the tendency to be nasty is not limited to those who have deep character flaws or those who were not taught manners growing up. It is a form of misbehavior that we are all susceptible to. Specifically, Keltner states that “[s]tudies show that people in positions of corporate power are three times as likely as those at the lower rungs of the ladder to interrupt coworkers, multitask during meetings, raise their voices, and say insulting things at the office. And people who've just moved into senior roles are particularly vulnerable to losing their virtues, my research and other studies indicate.”

To counter this tendency, and to do our part to reduce the number of nasty bosses in our workplace, Keltner recommends that we focus our attention on learning to manage ourselves. This is a hard lesson for most of us. We like to think of ourselves as reasonable, decent, and fair. We like to focus our attention and energy on trying to change others. This, of course, is a futile task. We might be able to identify nasty bosses, hold them accountable for their actions, and eliminate them from our

workplace, but we cannot change them. They must choose to change themselves.

To protect ourselves against our natural tendency to abuse power, Keltner recommends we take two steps:

- Develop greater self-awareness — especially when taking on leadership roles; and,
- Practice graciousness by engaging in the virtuous behaviors that helped us rise to a position of responsibility in the first place: empathy, gratitude, and generosity.

So, if you have too many nasty bosses in your workplace, take common sense steps to identify them and remove them from positions of power, but remember to first focus on managing yourself.

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