

Case Study

What to Do When the Boss Releases His or Her Inner Toddler

Put yourself in the following scenario:

You're one of ten VPs at a small chain of regional clothing stores, where you're in charge of the women's apparel departments. One of your jobs is to review each month's performance at a meeting of all ten department heads and the company president. Like your fellow VPs, you prepare a PowerPoint presentation showing the results for the previous month and your projections for the upcoming month, and during your presentation, you take the podium and lead the discussion from the front of the room.

On the whole, the meeting is part of a pretty sound overall strategy that allows everyone to know what's going on and what to expect across the board. Typically, the only drawback to an informative and productive session is the president's apparent inability to deal with bad news. He gets irritable and likes to lambaste "underperformers," and as a result, you and your colleagues always enter the meeting with stomachs in knots and leave it with full-blown gastric distress. The president himself thinks he's fostering open and honest discussion, but everyone else in the room knows plain old-fashioned bullying when they see it.

As luck would have it, you now find yourself at the front of the room, looking up at the floor-to-ceiling screen on which are emblazoned, in what looks to you like 500-point font (red, of course), your less than stellar monthly numbers. Sweating profusely, you're attempting to explain some disappointing sales figures when you hear a noise—a sort of thudding and rattling—against the wall behind you. Startled, you spin around toward the room and are surprised to see that everyone seems to be looking for something on the floor or checking the weather through the windows on one side of the room. Finally you glance toward the wall behind you, where you discover a bent meeting-room chair lying on the floor, and as you look up again, you see that the president is standing, his arms

crossed and his face scowling. “The next time you show me numbers like those,” he snarls, “I won’t miss!”

Believe it or not, this is a true story (although we’ve changed a few details—very few—in the interest of plausibility and dramatic impact). It’s told by John McKee, a consultant to professionals and businesspeople who want to move up the management ladder as quickly—and, presumably, with as little violence—as possible. McKee was actually an eye witness to the episode, and although he admits that it’s “the clearest example of a boss behaving badly” that he’s ever seen, he hastens to add that he won’t be the least bit surprised when someone comes up with an even better one.

Consultant Lynn Taylor, who specializes in the development of work and management teams, calls bosses like the one in our scenario *Terrible Office Tyrants*, or *TOTs*—managers who can’t control their power when they’re placed under stress. Taylor believes that the characterization is apt in light of research showing that bosses like the one we’ve described actually “return to their misbehaving ‘inner toddler’ to handle unwieldy pressures.” In other words, they revert to the kind of behavior that produced “self-serving results” when they were children. In the adult workplace, explains Taylor, they “occasionally find that their ability to master the world is limited, as it is with most mortal beings. This revelation, on top of their inability to communicate clearly in the moment, makes them furious and frustrated.”

According to Taylor, there are twenty “core, parallel traits [shared by] TOTs and toddlers.” The following, which are fairly aggressive, she catalogs under “Bratty Behavior”:

- Bragging
- Bullying
- Demanding
- Ignoring

- Impulsiveness
- Lying
- Self-centeredness
- Stubbornness
- Tantrums
- Territorialism
- Whining

“Most tantrums,” Taylor assures us, “don’t involve things being thrown across the room,” and TOT behavior, especially in its less-aggressive forms—fickleness, mood swings, neediness—can be “proactively managed” by employees who don’t care to be treated as emotional punching bags. She recommends “humor, common sense, rational thinking, and setting limits to bad behavior.” And remember, she adds, “You are the parent with the proverbial cookie jar when it comes to managing a TOT.”

Taylor’s approach to understanding and dealing with bad bosses isn’t entirely metaphorical, and she does suggest that beleaguered employees translate her general advice into some concrete coping techniques. When confronted by managerial neediness, for example, a good “pacifier” might be a reply such as: “It’ll be the first thing on my to-do list tomorrow.” If you’re looking for a handy toolbox of effective techniques, you can find dozens on the Internet, most of them posted by psychologists and organizational consultants. The following was compiled by Karen Burns, *U.S. News* columnist and specialist on career advice for women:

- Put everything in writing. Write and date progress reports. When you get verbal instructions, summarize them in a reply email.
- Be a star performer. Beyond just being a good employee, maintain a positive demeanor; it’s hard for someone to ambush you when you’re doing your job and

smiling in the process.

- Pick your moments. Rather than simply avoiding your boss, study his or her patterns. Steer clear when he or she is a nutcase and schedule interactions for times when he or she is stabilized.
- Seek community. Anchor your sanity in ties to coworkers and other managers. Find a mentor inside the workplace and someone outside to talk (and vent) to.
- Control what you can. You can't control your boss's irrational behavior, so control what you can—namely, the way you respond to it. Ignore the cranky tone of voice, and respond to the substance of what he or she says. Also, eat right, exercise, get enough sleep, and spend the rest of your time with sane people.
- Know your rights. If you want to take your grievance to the HR department (or further), be sure that you've documented your problem and your efforts to resolve it, and be specific about the remedy you're asking for (transfer, severance package, etc.).
- Identify the exits. Come up with a plan, and don't be bullied into taking action before you're ready.

Questions

1. According to some experts, the sort of behavior recorded here is more prevalent in the business world than in the rest of society. Assuming that this is true, why do you suppose that's the case?
2. Are you something of a perfectionist? Are you easily frustrated? How well suited are you—at this point in your life—to the task of managing other people?
3. How might attitudes, values, and perceptions affect the behaviors illustrated in this case?

4. How would stress come into play?