



4 Responses to a Bully Boss Bruce E. Roselle

In talking with a friend recently, she described a meeting she had with her boss that led to her resignation. It was not the first time she had such an encounter. In this meeting with her boss, he called her work attitude poor, accused her of not submitting to his authority, and blamed her for the problems the organization had been experiencing since she had first begun working there. His tone was critical, judgmental, and accusatory; he yelled at her and slammed his hands down on the desk. She was deeply shaken by the experience.

In responding to her upset, I confirmed that her boss was a bully. Though her boss was small in stature and usually affable and soft-spoken, he was the Jekyll-Hyde type whose emotions overpowered him when circumstances pushed his buttons. On the inside, he was actually frustrated, angry, and afraid.

The difference between a bully boss and one who is just tough and demanding is that tough bosses treat people the same. A bully boss, on the other hand, targets only one or a few victims. Bullies tend to pick on people who, in their minds, pose a threat to them. Their victims, in fact, are often smart, competent, and self-assured, and they may also be highly effective at collaboration and team orientation—something the bully boss typically is not.

Bullies often go after employees who are liked by their supervisors and praised for their work. Bullies typically have poor coping skills, and they mask their insecurities by victimizing others. Bully bosses often pick victims who have strong morals and integrity, or whose values conflict with those of the bully. As happened with my friend, bully bosses often target those who are new to an organization.

Over the years as an organizational psychologist, I have encountered bully bosses, and they typically display behaviors like these:

- **Question commitment, adequacy.** Bully bosses disparage opinions and ideas suggested by their victim. They blame victims for work issues and take credit themselves for successes.
- **Undermine projects, work success.** They set victims up for failure, withhold essential information, micromanage in ways that undercut, and interfere with the success of assignments.
- **Gossip.** Bully bosses will go to great lengths to paint their victims in a bad light. Sometimes, they pretend to be a concerned ‘friend’ who wants to help the victim through a situation, but then they use the information against the person, or purposely lie to damage their reputation.
- **Verbal abuse and intimidation.** They humiliate their victims in front of others. They shout,

swear, unfairly criticize, make sarcastic remarks, threaten, berate, and ridicule.

What options do you have if yours is a Bully Boss? Here are four ways you might respond:

Go along to get along. This approach is passive and simply acquiesces to the bullying behavior. In the short term, this approach seems to work, because it typically does not inflame situations so that they escalate. However, going along to get along usually does nothing to curtail or end the behavior, and it provides the bully with the confirmation that he/she is superior to the victim.

Directly fight against the behavior. Giving back in kind could, at first, seem to end the bullying behavior, since people usually do not stand up to bully bosses and this response momentarily throws them off. However, this feels like a “test of strength” to the bully boss, who will most likely amp up his/her response to win the fight and re-establish dominance.

Ignore the behavior to extinguish it. This is an approach that often works with children who exhibit bad behavior; instead of calling attention to it, just ignore it and reinforce more desirable behaviors. It also involves doing work-arounds to avoid situations in which the boss most often becomes a bully. This approach may seem very similar to the “going along” strategy, but the difference is that the victim is actively working to snuff out the bullying behavior by not giving the bully the reaction he/she wants.

Assertively stand up for yourself. The victim telling the bully boss their behavior is “bullying” and stating that this approach is not acceptable is the first step in this approach. Continuing to name behaviors as bullying and involving others in power (HR, the boss’s superior, the Board) to assess the behavior as bullying can lead to the person changing his/her approach (perhaps with help from an external coach), being limited in scope of leadership responsibility, or leaving the organization.

Clearly, the best long-term strategy is to assertively respond to the bullying behavior. As indicated, this often requires the support and intervention of others in the organization who wield power.