

# SMALL Business Times

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## Dealing with an abusive boss

*Building a team charter is better than going it alone*

By **DANIEL SCHROEDER**, for *Small Business Times*

**Question: I'm an administrative assistant for an employment services firm. I do a lot of research, word processing, database management, phone reception and light bookkeeping. I've been with my present employer for about 18 months. My dilemma has been the verbal and emotional abuse that my boss constantly directs at me. It has been a very difficult position working in this type of environment — his dictatorship style of management, the constant calling me a liar and the fact that he says does not like the way women talk. He refuses to allow me to explain how and why I do things — it is his way or not at all. My 30+ years of administrative experience should be evidence that I am not stupid. I am willing to try, but I am not given the autonomy to do so. Do you have any advice for these issues? Any help I obtain would be worthwhile. This is a very upsetting situation and getting worse by the day.**

**Answer:** First of all, let me just note that the examples you give of your boss's behavior create the image of a "bully." Clearly, he enjoys being in a position of power and treating his employees like "little people." Beyond that, his harassing style seems to have created a work environment that meets the definition of what the Equal Employ-

ment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) terms a "hostile work environment." While his cavalier attitude suggests that he is not too concerned about this, the fact of the matter is that what he is doing is poor business practice. And he's walking a fine line in terms of violating the law.

What can you do to address this situation? One thing to consider is to talk with your work colleagues and see if they are having similar problems. If they are, creating a team charter might be a nice first step in clarifying expectations. A charter clearly and simply states a team's purpose, operating guidelines, responsibilities, measures of success and scope of authority.

There are a couple of benefits to pursuing such an approach. First, you will not be "going it alone" if the other administrative assistants are participants, too. Second, this kind of approach takes the spotlight off of you as an individual. It focuses on the manner work is done within your area — this makes it an objective strategy.

In order to ensure that the process is a constructive one, use of a facilitator familiar with team dynamics and conflict resolution is warranted in this case.

Obviously, your boss will have to support such an approach. But if you sell it as a means of addressing underlying issues and increasing work output, he may buy in. Just to be clear - for maximum impact, your boss should absolutely participate in creating the team charter, but not dictate or prescribe either its content or the creative process that is used.

Upon completion, the team charter should be a formal, typed document to which everyone on the team has easy access. In essence, it will serve as an outline of the "rules of engagement." This document will be helpful in a number of ways, including:

- It will ensure that everyone works toward the same objectives.
- It will help build the team and serve as a source of team identity.
- It will help resolve differences and reduce conflicts.
- It will ease or eliminate performance problems having to do with uncertain expectations.

In creating your charter, use a format that best suits your needs. Here are some general guidelines for what to cover:

**Purpose** – Describe why the team exists. Define how the team will deliver a product or provide a service.

**Responsibilities** – Describes the responsibilities or outputs for which a team will be accountable.

**Boundaries** – Clarifies how much a team can do on its own.

**Ground rules** – Defines acceptable and unacceptable behavior within the team, including how conflicts will be resolved.

**Meetings** – Describes the time, frequency and location of meeting.

**Performance criteria** – Specifies the standards by which individual and collective performance will be measured and evaluated.

Regardless of whether you document a team charter, I also recommend that you meet with your boss one-on-one to share with him the seriousness with which you view this situation. Let him know that his behavior is upsetting you. Use “I” statements (i.e., “I feel \_\_\_\_\_ when you \_\_\_\_\_.”) Try to help him to see his own behavior and the impact of his actions and what would be more desirable behavior from your vantage point.

Additionally, if you have not already begun to do so, I recommend that you begin keeping a contemporaneous account of what is going on. Begin your record with a summary of the events so far. Just summarize the facts-dates, what you did, what he did, etc. Keep track of how things transpire from this point forward. That way, if punitive action is taken against you, you have documentation of your side of the story.

Further, if your company has a human resources staff, make an appointment to meet with one of the representatives to have the benefit of their counsel. Most organizations today look with disfavor on managers who act the way your boss is. Perhaps human resources will be able to intervene and get this situation headed in the right direction (e.g., they may be able to facilitate the team charter activity that I mentioned earlier).

Finally, if you try the things I have outlined in this article and you find yourself no further forward, it is time to start looking for a new work setting. While the grass may not necessarily be greener elsewhere, you simply do not have to tolerate the kind of behavior you are getting from your boss.

Frankly, it may be worth your while to simply initiate a job search right now. My experience with these kinds of scenarios tells me that your boss is one of those “leopards” who won’t easily be changing his “spots.”

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