

# If Your Boss Is the Problem, What Choices Do You Have?

by Holly Elissa Bruno

*I have learned that courage was not the  
absence of fear, but the triumph over it.*

*The brave person is not s/he  
who does not feel afraid,  
but s/he who conquers that fear.*

Nelson Mandela

## A Scary Question to Ask

Saying out loud “What do I do if my boss is the problem?” can be risky. To lessen the danger in asking this question, most people survey the environment first to make certain no one else is listening. Foreboding in the form of shortness of breath, pounding heart, and terror of repercussions crowds in on the person who needs an answer.



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I don't have enough fingers and toes to count the times I have been asked by teachers and administrators “What do I do if my boss is the problem?”

Thankfully, saying this question out loud to someone you trust is also alleviating. The next question is: “What, if anything, can I do to make things better?” Asking these scary questions is the first step to finding help.

## Scary Behavior by the Boss

As I listen to each person's concern about her boss, I hear that the boss is:

- encouraging others to complain to the boss rather than working things through with the employee who's asking the question.
- fostering a culture of gossip and negativity so no one knows whom to trust.
- reversing decisions made by the employee and thereby harming that employee's credibility and authority.
- micromanaging every decision, causing others to be fearful of taking action.
- unpredictable, temperamental.

- manipulative.
- unresponsive and unavailable (emotionally, physically, spiritually or all of these).
- verbally abusive.
- prone to yelling; threatening.
- shaming, blaming or both.
- telling people whatever they want to hear and anything but the truth.
- totally 'political,' doing whatever is needed to hold on to power.
- throwing employees 'under the nearest bus' to take the fall for the boss.
- unwilling or unable to make tough decisions.
- just plain 'off the wall.'
- other \_\_\_\_\_

Sound familiar to you? If you need to add more 'scary boss' traits to the list, I've left you space!

Many of us have worked for a bad boss or may well deal with one in the future. As educators, responsible for offering

children, families, and our programs our heartfelt and mindful best, we need a boss who ‘gets’ us, helps us grow professionally, treats us with respect and fairness, and has our back. We do not need a saboteur. Nor do we do need a power struggle. Power struggles are far from the most mature way to handle

workplace conflict. No one wins a power struggle. Even the ‘winner’ has a new enemy.

Take a look at the dilemma director LaDonna faces. How would you advise her to address the issues with her boss, Marietta? (See vignette below.)

## LaDonna’s Challenge: Who’s the Boss at Children’s Safe Harbor?

Children’s Safe Harbor Child Development Center was founded by Marietta 35 years ago. Safe Harbor’s enrollment has steadily grown, the number of staff has quadrupled, and six years ago, a sparkling new facility opened its doors.

Two months ago Marietta finally hired a director, an action her board had urged for at least a decade. Marietta’s new title of Executive Director came with a large bright office and a vague job description of ‘overseeing program operations’ while ‘supervising the Director.’ Board Chair, James, would have preferred that Marietta retire.

Troubles began before LaDonna walked through the door. Marietta, life-long personal friends with many staff members, assured staff she wasn’t really leaving; they could always come to her. She’d see them on the weekends, at church on Sunday, and at the beauty parlor. Marietta said, “Call me anytime — night or day.”

LaDonna, upbeat and enthusiastic, had been successful as an Assistant Director of a center across town; so, she was confident Safe Harbor was a good fit. James advised LaDonna that Safe Harbor needed new blood and fresh ideas; both the curriculum and staff policies were out-of-date and the staff lacked proper supervision. Parents were complaining that their children were bored.

LaDonna began by meeting with each team member individually, listening to their hopes and needs for the future, as well as to any concerns. She came away from these sessions feeling that more recently hired teachers would welcome change; but, many of the ‘old guard’ would need time to adjust.

At her first staff meeting, LaDonna shared the overall results of these interviews and noted that the majority of teachers wanted to try new approaches in their classrooms. She offered alternative curricula and invited teachers to share their ideas in small groups. Everyone appeared to be on board.

Little did she know that Marietta’s closest friends on staff complained to Marietta immediately: “I’m not changing the way I teach; I’ve taught this way for 20 years! The children love me.” Other long-time members of the staff agreed, upon Marietta’s prompting, that LaDonna was pushy. Marietta told them not to worry; she would straighten LaDonna out. Of course, everyone knew that Marietta handles conflict indirectly.

By the end of LaDonna’s first month, Safe Harbor is anything but safe. Teachers have formed exclusive cliques loyal to either LaDonna or Marietta. Some teachers outright tell LaDonna: “Marietta told me I didn’t have to make any changes.” Others smirk when LaDonna visits their classrooms and makes recommendations. LaDonna asked to meet with Marietta to get everything out on the table. When they met, Marietta suggested, with a smile, that LaDonna must be imagining things. Marietta felt confident the Board will come crawling to have her return as Director.

And there you have it: a power struggle rages beneath the surface. Can the children feel it? You bet they can. Will anything help when the boss, like Marietta, is the problem? Or, are we stuck like flies on sticky paper?

For help with this dilemma, I interviewed three groups of experts and expert practitioners on the topic:

- Jack Gabarro, Harvard Business School professor and author of *Managing Your Boss* (2005) and *Hechinger Report* author Justin Snider;
- Robert Sutton, Stanford professor and author of *Good Boss: Bad Boss* (2006);
- Brandi Pritchett-Johnson, University of Florida counseling and ethnicity expert; Dwight Johnson, elementary school principal; Marquita Davis, executive director of a large community agency in Alabama; and, Cori Berg, an early childhood director in Texas.

You can listen to each of these interviews, now podcasts, at [www.hollyelissabruno.com](http://www.hollyelissabruno.com) or [BAMradionetwork.com](http://BAMradionetwork.com), “Leadership Strategies” by entering the name of any one of these guests.

## Good Boss, Bad Boss: What Makes the Difference?

Let’s get clear on what distinguishes a good boss from a bad one. You know what makes a boss good or bad for you. LaDonna is finding out.

To put your experience in context, consider emotional intelligence expert, Daniel Goleman’s (2006) comparison of the traits and behaviors of both types of bosses (p. 277).

Good Boss	Bad Boss
Shows empathy	Self-centered
Decisive	Indecisive
Takes responsibility	Blames
Humble	Arrogant
Shares authority	Mistrusts
Great listener	Blank wall
Encourager	Doubter
Communicator	Secretive
Courageous	Intimidating
Sense of humor	Can't lighten up

Bob Sutton cautions that even the best bosses have an 'inner jerk' — that part of themselves that loses touch due to 'power poisoning.' To reverse this dynamic, Sutton suggests that leaders pay a bounty of \$20 to any staff member who has the courage to tell the boss when the boss is misbehaving.

Let's compare the characteristics of good and bad bosses with research findings on characteristics of the leader as mentor (DeLong, Gabarro & Lees, 2008, p. 4). A good mentor:

- is someone absolutely credible whose integrity transcends the message, be it positive or negative.
- tells you things you may not want to hear, but leaves you feeling you have been heard.
- interacts with you in a way that makes you want to become better.
- makes you feel secure enough to take risks.
- gives you the confidence to rise above your inner doubts and fears.

- supports your attempts to set stretch goals for yourself.
- presents opportunities and highlights challenges you might not have seen on your own.

### When Your Boss is Bad, What Can You Do?

Jack Gabarro, Harvard Business School professor's take on "What do you do if your boss is the problem" is twofold:

- Step back to evaluate and address what you bring to the conflict.
- Don't go over your boss's head unless you have a virtually 100 percent chance of success.

Gabarro encourages us to assess ourselves, the employee, first by asking:

- What behaviors of mine might tick off my boss?
- Am I focusing on what the boss (and our organization) needs as much as I am on my own needs?
- Am I expecting the impossible from any human being?

Gabarro advises us,

"If you're having a problem with your boss, it is seldom all one-sided. . . . Start off with the premise that you are contributing some percentage of the problem, if for no other reason [than] because you don't understand who your boss is, what her strengths and weaknesses are, what his style or preferences [are] for receiving information or discussing either problematic or sensitive issues . . ." (Justin Snider's blog).

Gabarro reminds us that bosses have unique needs. Specifically, bosses have preferred ways of getting information. Some bosses need to hear the facts; other

bosses need a big picture perspective. Some bosses want you to offer solutions. Other bosses want you to solve problems yourself and leave the boss alone. To determine your boss's needs, ask her direct questions like: "How do you need me to work with you?" and "What do you expect of me?" Gabarro encourages us: Put yourself in your boss's shoes: What does she or he need from you to be able to steer the organization?

### Cleaning Up Your Part of the Problem

This empathetic approach to your boss helps you:

- find ways to speak your boss's language.
- place your needs in a larger perspective.
- 'get over yourself' if you are expecting your boss to be perfect.

Everyone needs something from the boss. How can you distinguish yourself by placing the organization's needs first, rather than focusing only on your situation? Gabarro's point makes sense if the employee is able to honestly assess herself and accept that her response to the boss may contribute to the problem. Gabarro's approach falters if the boss is a tyrant. A tyrant is a tyrant.

### Make Sure the Stars are in Alignment if You Go Over Your Boss's Head

I asked Jack Gabarro: "Is going over your boss's head ever appropriate?" What if your boss really is the problem, and no amount of your hard work and/or changed behavior or attitude can make that right? My question stopped the conversation.

Gabarro's response was the equivalent of a police siren: Don't go over your boss's head unless you have "all your stars in alignment. You'll pay for it one way or another."

Commentator Justin Snider, also a guest on my radio program, summarized this end-run tactic in his blog: "Gabarro and I agreed that going over your boss's head to complain about him or her doesn't often end well, though it may sometimes seem like the only option." The message: When your boss is the problem, put up, shut up (or get out). This is not what most employees want to hear. The advice sounds like a prescription for workplace servitude. By choosing to 'go along to get along' with a problematic boss, you have to accept or at least put up with offensive behavior. When an employee's dignity or integrity is under attack, this stick-it-out approach comes with too heavy a cost. At the least, the employee will feel resentful and demoralized. The worst case is burnout, illness and/or depression. The conflict, if left unresolved, will likely result in the employee's getting fired. Bosses don't like putting up with difficult employees either.

## Confronting the Boss: Being Honest About the Problem

Wouldn't it be wondrous if every boss could listen to her employees' feedback with an open mind and without taking negative feedback personally? Do you know bosses like that? If you do, you can take the direct approach: tell your boss what the problem is and offer (and request) alternative solutions that would work for you, the boss, and the organization. Be open to the boss's point of view and her solutions. Even if your boss has difficulty dealing with conflict or negative feedback, you can still attempt to rework your relationship with her. Consider the step-by-step process below.

## Steps to Taking the Direct Approach with Your Boss When Your Boss is the Problem

Prepare yourself:

*Examine and clarify your intention:* What do you need most out of the meeting? What are you willing to accept? What are the deal-breakers?

*Drop the attitude:* Leave at the door (even legitimate) feelings of resentment, hurt, martyrdom, blame or shame.

*Do damage control:* Prepare for the worst case scenario. What would you do if you lose your job? Can you at least make sure you get a severance package and/or a good reference?

### Set up the meeting and environment for success:

- When you request a meeting with your boss, be direct and respectful about the purpose of the meeting.
- Agree on a time when you can talk without interruption.
- Set an agenda with time limitations.
- If possible, arrange to meet in a neutral off-site location like a quiet and private booth or table at a restaurant.
- Agree on the process you will use to resolve differences including the 'we agree to disagree' option.

### Hold the meeting:

- As objectively as you can, tell your boss what you need in order to perform your job to the best of your ability. Be clear about the barriers that detract from your performance. Give concrete examples.
- Ask your boss what s/he needs from you in order to work effectively together.

- Discuss what changes each one of you can and is willing to make.
- Agree on next steps.
- If appropriate, end the meeting by stating one thing you honestly appreciate/value about the other person: something you would miss if you no longer worked together.
- Alternatively, if the meeting proves useless, decide how you can gracefully bring it to an end. Manage your frustration level to avoid getting into a screaming match.

### Debrief the meeting:

- What went well?
- What didn't feel right?
- What did you both learn about one another that will help in future interactions?
- If the meeting was a failure, what are your choices now?
- Document the important decisions made at the meeting as soon as possible.

## Worst Case Scenario: A Mutually Respectful Conversation isn't Going to Happen Because the Boss Really is the Problem

This is the situation most employees find themselves in: for whatever reason, a heart-to-heart and/or meeting of the minds is not going to happen. This is painful for anyone. Who wants to deal with the potential disruption to your personal and professional life, not getting the recommendation you need, wondering if anyone will hire you if you can't get along with your boss, concern about paying your bills or uprooting your family? For

many employees, these disruptions are overwhelming.

Even in this worst case scenario, you have choices.

**Stay at the job, doing what you can in your own domain.** Change your expectations. Limit (but don't avoid) interactions with your boss. Get realistic. Set aside the expectation that you will come to a meeting of the minds. Instead, manage your boundaries as well as you can. Be sure to accomplish everything in your job description, and document your actions.

**Keep your boss informed.** Document conversations with your boss. Much as you might need to, do not bad-mouth the boss to others. That insubordination qualifies you for termination and demoralizes other staff.

Share only with a trusted confidant who will help you find ways to deal with a less-than-ideal workplace relationship. Beware of characterizing your boss as a red-eyed, fire-breathing, employee-devouring cartoon character devil. Even the worst boss is human with some redeeming qualities. Keeping a balanced perspective in the most painful situations will prevent you from casting yourself in a holier-than-thou victim position. Victims have no power to make things better.

Staying on the job works if your job is meaningful enough for you to make the sacrifice of working without a boss's support and encouragement. In early childhood, most teachers or administrators who decide to stay at the organization do so because they love the children and their coworkers. Or, we stay on for personal reasons: our children are enrolled at the center; we need the income; no other jobs are available; we can't relocate.

You also need ways to release anxiety. Get stress out of your body before stress becomes toxic. Go outside. Walk it off. Surround yourself with beauty. Do things you love. Do acts of kindness, not just for others, but for yourself. You'll need to continuously restore yourself if your boss is the problem.

## Find Yourself a Better Job and Resign

Your alternative to sticking out a bad situation is to vamoose. When you have done what is within your power to work things out and the situation remains unhealthy for you, move on. Scary as this is, getting sick, getting fired, and/or burning out are scarier possibilities.

Cut your losses. Build a larger network. Do the legwork of finding other happier positions. Move on as soon as you can. In time, you will find peace.

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*"We often look so long and so regretfully at the door that closes, we don't see the door that is opening for us."*

Thomas Edison

Stepping out of a toxic relationship will be your first reward. If you make this choice, may the spiritual principle work for you: Close one door so that another can open.

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*Have enough courage to trust love one more time and always one more time.*

Maya Angelou

## The Cross-cultural Challenge: Complication or Growth Opportunity?

Employee-boss ruptures are even more complex when cultural differences are part of the challenge. In early childhood, in particular, when white

women manage black women, painful cultural histories can literally color the relationship. Dr. Brandi Pritchett-Johnson encourages us to examine our cultural history for baggage that jams up current workplace dynamics. She suggests that both employee and boss ask themselves together: "What (part of the problem) is 'my stuff'? Is this 'our stuff'? How are we going to get through this together?" Workplace rules of conduct can be very different for women of each culture.

Pritchett-Johnson cautions that black women, especially as leaders, often face unspoken negative expectations about their competency. A black leader will be challenged in her authority and feel she has to prove herself. Dr. Marquita Davis advises us all to discern who we are, share personal stories, become real so that "we laugh, we talk, we cry." When we become individuals and not a stereotype, we stand a far better chance of resolving differences. "Let them see who you are," urges Marquita. Once you have done that, you can make "deliberate opportunities to create relationships" that function well.

This does not mean that we deny our differences. Studies continuously show that when we delude ourselves into thinking, "We're all the same," we are not facing the considerable differences each of our histories brings to the present. Insisting "I don't see any differences" is disrespectful, Dwight Johnson reminds us.

If a black woman is upset and expresses herself passionately, she does not need to be told "Calm down!" cautions Dwight. Let her share her feelings, affirm her right to those feelings, and let her know you hear her.

In cross cultural, as in other workplace situations, the healthiest organizations and individuals are the ones who ask: "What can I learn?" Bob Sutton

notes. Let go of defining situations as “successes or failures.” Look to learn a new principle or affirm a constructive practice each time you face a challenge like what to do when your boss is the problem.

Again, the underlying task is to either address the problem directly and authentically with your boss or, if your boss cannot/will not have this mutually respectful conversation with you, make a choice: move on or stay on with clear boundaries.

One thing is certain: someone has to leave or change. If you were LaDonna, what would you choose?

## A Personal Call

In the end, deciding what to do if your boss is the problem is a personal call. Only you can make that call. I hope that you, fortified by your own integrity and this information, feel better prepared to make that call if your boss is the problem. Remember:

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*“Above all, be the heroine of your life, not the victim.”*

Nora Ephron

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## Help for LaDonna

Meanwhile, LaDonna is about to walk into her “it’s-time-to-get-everything-out-on-the-table” meeting with her boss, Marietta.

I’m interested: Has this article offered you any useful ideas? What in your own experience might help you coach LaDonna?

Each of us will have our own approach. Here’s one possibility that flows from applying the steps above.

**Prepare yourself:** LaDonna needs to find out if Marietta is willing to let LaDonna lead the organization. If both LaDonna and Marietta stay on, both need clear job descriptions. If Marietta cannot let go of her need to control, that may be a deal-breaker for LaDonna.

**Drop the attitude:** LaDonna, now aware of Marietta’s sabotage, accepts that she cannot change Marietta; however, she needs to set boundaries with Marietta on who will do what. LaDonna also needs to determine if Marietta’s statements can be trusted. How will measurable expectations be set and assessed if an agreement can be forged?

**Do damage control:** LaDonna has worked on developing a trusting, straightforward relationship with James, and other Board members. They assure her she can stay on if she wants to and that they will deal with Marietta’s inability to let go. LaDonna also begins work on her master’s degree, seeking also to network her way into other possible jobs.

**Set up the meeting and environment for success:** With the Board’s support, LaDonna invites Marietta to meet with her with the goal of establishing clear job descriptions and boundaries.

- *Agree on a time* when you can talk with each other without interruption: Friday morning works.
- *Set an agenda with time limitations:* Both agree that they will talk about who should be doing what.
- *If possible, meet in a neutral off-site location* like a quiet and private booth or table at a restaurant. Marietta suggests the local country club, where she is a member; LaDonna suggests a local restaurant, which has quiet and private booths.
- *Agree on the process you will use to resolve differences* including the “we agree to disagree” option. Marietta tells LaDonna: “We don’t have any differences. You just haven’t been around long enough to understand how things work here.” LaDonna suggests that James join them at the meeting to facilitate the conversation. Marietta, thinking James is ‘in her pocket,’ agrees.

**Hold the meeting:** LaDonna states that she needs full control over staff supervision; she will consult Marietta as needed. She then asks Marietta: “What do you need from me...?”

- *Ask your boss: What do you need from me in order to work effectively together?* Marietta, offended, chides LaDonna saying: “Who do you think you are! You can’t come in here and expect people to change. You have no idea how to direct a program. You’ve only been an Assistant Director; you have no experience.”
- *Discuss what changes each of you can and are willing to make:* Marietta says she isn’t willing to make any changes. LaDonna says she needs to be free to supervise staff without being ‘end run’: Marietta smirks.
- *Agree on next steps — If appropriate, end the meeting by stating one thing you honestly appreciate/value about the other person:* something you would miss if you no longer worked together. LaDonna tells Marietta: “You have done a remarkable job creating this program from scratch. I respect you for that. However, for me to stay on, I need to be able to do my job.”

Assuming LaDonna is black and Marietta is white, what additional dynamics may need to be addressed in their relationship? Both women turn to James. What happens next? You decide.

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