EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
The literature is replete with case studies and examples of how to manage your workforce. But lists of tips for managing your boss are quite lacking. And that's a shame, because after all, your relationship with your supervisor is important for your job and future. As one veteran manager in this article's series of focus groups stated, "To be honest, the onus for making this relationship work is on me."

Managing your boss in the 21st century

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As veteran business educators who consult, conduct applied research and develop business leaders, we regularly come into contact with employees and managers at all levels. Several years ago, we started noticing that many people were struggling in their working relationships (or lack of) with their bosses. People from all different size organizations, sectors and career stages wanted advice about how to deal with their current boss.

A poor working relationship with the boss can create a great deal of trouble in our lives. Left unchecked, such woes can threaten our career and workplace survival. Bosses can impact workloads, working hours, attitude, sense of self-worth, daily efficiency and effectiveness, professional and personal development, ability to execute strategic goals and objectives and, ultimately, our careers.

It's clear that most of us need our bosses to help us get our work done to varying degrees. The stronger our working relationship, the greater the likelihood of higher performance and less workplace stress and drama. And a more viable and effective working relationship with your boss increases the chances of career success.

Despite this, there is little research on how employees should "manage" their bosses and little, if any, formal education and training available. Fostering a solid and productive working relationship with our boss leaves us pretty much on our own to learn survival tactics or rules of the road.

So we started chronicling the concerns and frustrations that people had in their working relationships with their superiors. This process has included a wide variety of applied research projects investigating good and bad bosses and their impact on their employees.

**The awful 13**

This research has documented the accompanying unhealthy and counterproductive working relationships that result when "bad" bosses interact with their subordinates. Each type of problematic boss produces his or her own sets of frustrations. Here is the list of 13 "bad boss archetypes" that research has uncovered, along with the corresponding employee frustrations:

1. **Mystery bosses:** Leaders who fail to clarify expectations and direction, leaving employees with no clear sense of where they are headed or what should be done to get there.
   - **Employee frustration:** Employees are wracked with uncertainty, have no clear focus and never know if they are doing the right activities, working on the right projects or attacking the right issues.

2. **Egomaniacal bosses:** Leaders who are egocentric, narcissistic, disrespectful of others and who make everything about themselves—yes, everything.
   - **Employee frustration:** Employees are openly disrespected, don't have a voice and are crushed by the boss' ego-driven behavior.

3. **Emotionally unintelligent bosses:** Leaders who have horrific people skills and frequently approach...
working relationships with brute force, indifference and no real concern for others.

Employee frustration: Employees lack any kind of interpersonal relationship whatsoever with their boss, causing a host of other workplace problems.

4. Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde bosses: Leaders whose moods are highly unpredictable and who demonstrate emotional instability, as these managers provide few clues as to when he/she is "approachable" or how they will react on a particular day.

Employee frustration: Employees are constantly under stress and walking on eggshells because they do not know what to expect day in and day out.

5. Noncommunicative bosses: Leaders who fail to communicate with the people around them, creating a communications vacuum that does a poor job of sharing information, listening and creating an environment where workers know what's going on.

Employee frustration: Employees operate without needed information and don't have a voice to ask questions, share concerns and offer suggestions about how to improve performance.

6. Clueless bosses: Leaders who are incompetent, completely out of touch with reality, who have no real idea what is going on around them and float above the intricacies of running an operation.

Employee frustration: Working for a person incapable of adding value to the enterprise and whose behavior is damaging drains both performance and morale on a daily basis.

7. Firefighting bosses: Leaders who do not plan or think ahead and tend to create crises of their own making by their ongoing lack of forethought and preparation for operational and individual workplace activity.

Employee frustration: It becomes impossible to effectively plan, prioritize and take advantage of opportunities when everything is an "emergency." This leads to inefficiency, poor performance and fatigue.

8. Unrealistic bosses: Bosses who consistently set overly aggressive stretch goals, establish unrealistic timelines and make promises and commitments that cannot be realistically kept.

Employee frustration: Employees are discouraged, disengaged and disappointed as they feel set up to fail. They are demoralized to be working on goals and projects that are unreachable.

9. Indecisive bosses: Leaders who avoid making decisions, solving problems and addressing conflicts. They are beset with the paralysis by analysis syndrome.

Employee frustration: Bottlenecks and an inability to get things done result as their bosses create inactivity and stalemate because of their inability to make a timely decision.

10. Status quo bosses: Leaders who are stagnant, resist and even fight change, process improvement initiatives or any effort to alter an organization's current modus operandi.

Employee frustration: Employees are stymied when they attempt improvements because they have a leader who prefers to sit back and keep doing what they have always been doing, whether it is working or not.

11. Lone Ranger bosses: Leaders who do not understand the importance of teamwork and cooperation and who perform their own job with little or no concern for others.

Employee frustration: A lack of teamwork and cooperation make it more difficult to get work done and improve team performance.

12. Jealous bosses: Leaders who are threatened by their subordinate's strong performance and who take credit for
every success but are quick to cast blame on others for failure.

**Employee frustration: Employees** feel cheated because their superior takes credit for their ideas and work. The workforce constantly is treated unfairly and kept off balance.

1. **Unscrupulous bosses: Leaders** who are unethical, overly political and who constantly operate with hidden, dark or overly personal agendas.

2. **Uncertain and fear:** Doubt, uncertainty and fear crop up as employees are constantly worried of being on the wrong side of the organization's best interest, ethical practices or even the law.

These categories do not operate in isolation, as a bad boss can demonstrate more than one of these archetypes. But all the frustrations these bosses generate make it easy to understand why bosses are still the number one reason why employees voluntarily leave an employer.

Every one of these categories of bad bosses can destroy employee morale, teamwork, communications, creativity and innovation, organizational culture, performance and careers.

Whether you have a good boss or a bad boss, you must take proactive steps to ensure a viable and effective working relationship. So let's look at what we can do to make this happen.

**Filling in the missing data**

Researching the literature on the subject did not yield much useful information. There were many opinions based on anecdotal data and individual life experiences, along with a few academic pieces in fabricated laboratory settings. But real-world feedback from working professionals was minimal.

So as part of a management development program, we conducted a series of focus groups with a cross-section of nearly 300 business leaders and professionals. We asked participants, "Based on your experience, what do you consider to be the practices that are most important in creating an effective working relationship with your boss?" Participants were asked to respond to this question individually. Then they were assigned to five-person focus groups to share their individual findings, discuss the importance of each and come to a consensus on the most important factors.

Each focus group was asked to identify no more than 10 factors, which were content analyzed to identify common ground. We collated the results into 11 lessons below. Each lesson includes a key question that you can ask to assess the quality of your own working relationship with your boss.

1. **Accept the fact that you cannot change your boss.** It is virtually impossible for employees to upwardly impact their boss' approach to doing business, personality, management style or interpersonal and decision-making skills. Stated more simply, most of us are not in a position to change our boss. This is reality, not fatalism. Our sample agreed that each employee must adjust behavior to accommodate the shortcomings and bad boss tendencies of superiors. As one participant said: "It might not be fair, but I need to adjust my style to better sync up with the style of my boss. Otherwise things could go south quickly."

   **Key question:** Are you adjusting your style and approach to your work and workplace to accommodate your boss' style and even shortcomings?

2. **Put yourself in your boss' shoes.** It is imperative to understand your boss' performance goals and what your organization expects your boss to deliver. Understanding these challenges and pressures can affect you and your fellow co-workers in powerful and dynamic ways. When you know your boss has overly aggressive goals, too much on their plate, unrealistic timelines, or maybe even a bad boss herself, it can make you more empathetic and put you in a better position to offer help. To gain this understanding requires emotional intelligence and great situational awareness, and such knowledge can help you put together a game plan to work better with your boss.

   **Key question:** Do you really know and understand what your boss is being paid to deliver and the pressures that he or she is under from superiors?

3. **Get on the same page with your boss.** Once we know what our boss is being held accountable for, it is our job to get on the same page and identify the results that we need to deliver. Where there is ambiguity, each of us may need to help our boss clarify what our job entails and what results are needed to help our bosses be successful.

When bosses are busy, it is not uncommon to find drift between the boss' and the employee's performance expectations and priorities. And while formal performance planning sessions are important, it is a great practice to create regularly a list of all the things you are working on and results you are pursuing for their review. Then schedule a meeting with your boss to make sure that you are properly aligned. You want to make sure that you succeed in a way that contributes to your boss' success - and that the boss clearly understands this linkage. The more dynamic your workplace, the greater the need for this ongoing alignment.

   **Key question:** Are you proactively realigning your goals, roles and responsibilities with your boss to make sure that you are operating in concert with them?

4. **Work hard to know and understand your boss' strengths and weaknesses.** You and your boss are linked together whether you like it or not. So it's really important to pay attention to his or her work habits, management style and how they operate.

Do you know what motivates your boss? Have you assessed your boss' emotional intelligence? Have you taken
the time to figure out your boss’ personality quirks and idiosyncrasies? Do you know and understand the things that set off your boss?

This information should put you in a better position to use your own emotional intelligence to find more effective ways to communicate and interact with your boss. Failing to know your boss in this regard puts you at a disadvantage when developing strategies that will allow you to both play to your superior’s strengths and deal with your boss’ weaknesses.

**Key question:** Do you truly know your boss’ strengths and weaknesses and understand his or her idiosyncrasies?

5. Regularly assess the overall quality of your relationship with your boss and conduct an annual SWOT analysis. It is important to evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to your ongoing working relationship with your boss.

Here are some important questions to guide your assessment. What does your boss do that helps your productivity and performance? What does your boss do that hurts your ability to deliver desired results? What specific things represent opportunities that could be used to improve your working relationship? Are there any specific threats to your working relationship that could create real problems for you?

Our research shows that people are quicker to assess working relationships with their peers and subordinates but often fail to see the value in assessing their working relationship with their boss. Taking the time to understand what is working well and what needs work is an important tactical step to identify ways to better manage your boss.

**Key question:** Do you take the time to think through and assess the quality of your current working relationship with your boss and specify things you need to improve that relationship?

6. Communicate using your boss’ rules. Learn how and when to communicate with your bosses and how best to keep him or her informed. Most bosses have a preferred style of communication and preferred channel for communicating. It might be team meetings, one-on-one discussions, emails, managing by walking around or talking on the phone.

The important point is that you understand what your boss prefers and demonstrate initiative to keep your boss informed about the status of projects, important performance metrics and information that puts your supervisor in a better position to make decisions. A byproduct of demonstrating this initiative will be an increase in two-way communication, which is almost always a very good thing.

And while there are exceptions, it's generally not a bad thing to be confident enough to ask your boss how things are going for her, how was his weekend or even share a good book or a movie. Fostering an appropriate personal side can normalize communications and make it easier to talk about important work-related things.

**Key question:** Do you know and understand your boss’ communication patterns, habits and practices, doing your best to communicate with them on their terms?

7. Be proactive and keep aligned.

Another important practice was that of staying proactive and conducting regular alignment sessions with your boss to keep on track. Regular alignment sessions create an opportunity to keep our bosses coaching and providing us with the input we need to be effective.

Scheduling such regular meetings to discuss your performance, what you are working on and solicit your boss’ input is one of the best things that can improve your working relationship. Many bosses don’t always take the time to provide feedback and coach their employees, and many are not comfortable doing so. So meeting with your boss once or twice a month can do wonders to normalize discussions about performance.

**Key question:** Do you proactively schedule regular alignment meetings with your bosses to review and prioritize your workload and give them an opportunity to provide you with input and feedback?

8. Establish your brand and make it a practice to under promise and over deliver. Our focus groups continually discussed the importance of developing a reputation (your brand) as a person who knows how to deliver desired results the right way.

What are you known for at work? Are you known for being easy to work with? Having a great attitude? Being a great team member? Being a strong communicator? Being a high performer? Knowing and understanding how people at work, especially your boss, perceive you can help you manage your relationship with your boss.

Along the same lines, make it a practice to under promise and over deliver. Most bosses appreciate when their people exceed expectations. Our long-term career success is contingent on developing a track record of consistently delivering desired results. So when you deliver what your boss expects on an ongoing basis, it establishes your credibility as someone your boss can depend on. And much research makes it clear that once people depend on us, our influence with them increases quickly, which is critically important in our relationships with our superiors.

**Key question:** Are you known to be a person who is easy to work with and who consistently delivers desired results? If not, why not?

9. Be a problem-solver. Our participants offered a strong piece of advice: Never identify a problem or a complaint without bringing your boss a potential solution that you have thought through. Otherwise, you will be perceived as a complainer or doomsayer.

Most bosses have a fair number of problems and issues on their plate. Don’t be surprised if you get less than a warm reception when you bring your boss another problem or troublesome issue. If your boss needs to know something, use your knowledge of
his or her modus operandi to decide on the best time and place. Make sure you properly frame the issue to make it easier for your boss to understand the problem and why it is important.

Then offer up your ideas or your potential solution(s) — it helps if you have written up a concise document. We all take things more seriously when they are put forth in writing. The document tells your boss that, whatever the issue is, it is serious and you have invested the time to jump-start the problem-solving process.

**Key question:** Are you known by your boss as a person who is a problem-solver or are you perceived to be a complainer or malcontent?

10. **Show respect for your boss even if your supervisor might not deserve it.** When you work for a bad boss, remember that this relationship is not taking place in a vacuum. While people may not like your boss, they also are looking at you and assessing how you respond. Always show respect for your boss. Don’t engage in gossip, backbiting, character assassination or making your boss look bad behind his or her back.

Many workers lead dual lives and have multiple personalities when it comes to their bosses. To the boss’ face, they are upbeat, compliant, obedient, obliging, accommodating, helpful and respectful. Yet, behind the boss’ back they are the opposite, making fun of him, mocking her and demonstrating open contempt and resentment.

We understand why people engage in such practices, but here are a couple of warnings. First, these things never happen in a void, as other people are watching and listening. When word of bad-mannered behavior gets back to the boss, it can spell career disaster for the backstabber. Second, it sets a terrible example and can have a demoralizing effect on other people. And finally, it causes other people to wonder what you say about them when they are not around.

So, as the old adage goes, if you don’t have something good to say about your boss, it’s probably best not to say anything.

**Key question:** Do you demonstrate respect for your boss regardless of how bad he might be and resist the temptation to act in a fashion that might undermine her?

11. **Know when it’s time to go.** Our final lesson circles back to our first lesson: You can’t do much to change your boss. So if your boss is prone to extreme mood swings, or has a destructive personality or is openly disrespectful of you and the members of your team, maybe it’s time to go. If you’re stressed out and feel nauseous when you come to work or your job is hampering your health, maybe it’s time for a change. And, in particular, if your boss is engaged in dubious and illegal activities, you may need to remove yourself from the situation quickly.

**Key question:** Is your current boss performing in a fashion that makes it clear that your work situation is no longer viable? If so, what is your exit strategy and timeframe?

**A call for action**

One focus group participant provided us with a great closing thought. He said: "For me to be successful, I need to have great working relationships with my peers, and especially with my boss. I need to do the things I can do to make the relationship with my boss work, and it really comes down to managing expectations, focus, communications and knowing and understanding each other, which is not always easy but is required. I need to do the things that I can do to make it work. And if I can't, I have to be smart enough to realize that maybe I'm not in the right place."

Regardless of the type of boss you work for, each of you should review the questions we have proposed and take action. Implementing these important lessons can make life easier and put you in a better position to deliver results, which is the cornerstone of career success.

For most of us, taking these proactive steps to improve our working relationship with our boss is simply a good thing to do. We need to remember that we need our bosses if we are to be successful. And they need us if they are to be successful.

So make it a priority to assess your working relationship and develop a plan to make that relationship better, stronger and more productive. Your career depends on it.