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Issue: A Boorish Boss Makes Work Unbearable

The bad behavior started even before the job started and only got worse. Could anything have been done to change the situation?

I should have known what kind of boss Jackie Pebble would be from the first moment I had contact with him, and maybe I already did. But the rent was due, my COBRA insurance had run out, and I was sick of interviewing. I needed a job—fast.

When I arrived at the appointed time for my first interview, for a senior editor job at a trade magazine for dermatologists, he kept me waiting in the lobby of the company's Manhattan office for 15 minutes. Then the receptionist handed me her phone receiver and said, "Mr. Pebble would like to speak with you."

"I can't see you today," he announced. "I'm too busy."

CALLING HR TO COMPLAIN

His rudeness left me momentarily speechless. Finally I managed to say, "I came all the way from Connecticut for this interview, so I'd really appreciate it if we could have it today."

"All right," he said. "But you're going to have to wait."

Wait I did, for about 45 minutes. He finally showed up, ushered me in, and gruffly quizzed me about my journalistic background for about 10 minutes, and the interview was over. When I got home that afternoon, I still felt annoyed about the discourteous treatment Jackie had doled out earlier in the day. So annoyed, in fact, that I called HR to complain. What did I have to lose? There was no chance I would get this job, I figured, and I didn't want it anyway.

THE WORST BOSS I'VE EVER HAD

Gayle, the HR person I spoke with, was very nice. "I'm sorry to hear you had a bad experience," she said. "But on the bright side, Jackie was just up here asking if we could raise the salary for the job to meet your requirements."

I was speechless again. Maybe he is a good guy, I thought, and I'd just happened to catch him in a rare disagreeable mood. And money talks, after all. "Well, that does make me feel a little better," I said. I ended up accepting the job and starting work the following Monday.

By Friday, Jackie had established himself as the worst boss I'd ever had—a distinction he still holds. He would give me a project and bark a few directions, never explaining them thoroughly or giving me the info I needed. The first day, he threw a bunch of photos at me that needed to be returned to whoever sent them. But all they had was the person's name—no address, no phone number. This was back in pre-Internet days, long before you could simply type "David Stein" and "dermatologist" in Google and come up with some clues.

THE PATH OF MINIMAL INVOLVEMENT

"How am supposed I to find the addresses?" I asked.

"I want minimal involvement in this," he said.

I came to realize that was his mantra. A couple of days later, he asked me to write an article about the results of a dermatology practice management study. He told me the word count he expected, and said, "I want minimal

involvement."

AN OUTBURST OVER NOTES

The study was rather complicated, so I made a list of some of the conclusions I drew. Before writing the story, I asked Jackie to take a quick look at the results I'd culled to make sure they'd been interpreted correctly. It was three days before the story was due.

"How could you turn in a story like this?" he yelled. "These are hardly sentences."

"That's not the story," I said and then repeated, "Those are results I'm asking you to look at to make sure they're interpreted correctly."

GIVING SPARE DIRECTIONS

"Well, I expect much better from you," he said. "This is very sloppy work." He threw it back. There was no point in trying to explain again. When I turned in the actual story on time three days later, he passed it along in the production process without complaining, so I assumed he was satisfied with it. But I still felt a little shaken by his outburst over the notes, and I was hoping I'd get more guidance next time.

But in the coming weeks, a pattern emerged. He would assign work, give spare directions, announce his trademark, "I want minimal involvement with that." And he was gratuitously negative. His other signature phrase was "why didn't you?" Instead of making suggestions about a story I wrote or edited, he would ask, "why didn't you include a paragraph about third-party insurers?"

In addition to the communications problems, he took advantage of me and the rest of his subordinates financially. My third day on the job, he announced he wanted me to attend an off-site media event with him later that morning. "We'll take a cab there," he said. "And you'll pay for the cab and get reimbursed later." Anything that required the laying out of money, he made us take care of. We did get the money back eventually, but it seemed tacky to have junior employees shell out cash.

SEEKING HELP FROM THE PUBLISHER

At one point a couple of months into the job, I went to Jackie's boss, the publisher, to complain that I was finding Jackie hard to work with.

"Look, Anne," Barry said sympathetically. "I know Jackie has a lack of people skills. I know he's unreasonable. I know he can be nasty. If he's really making you uncomfortable, you owe it to yourself to get another job."

Naively, I asked, "But don't you think it's wrong the way he talks to people?"

"My boss Helen talks to me that way every day," he answered.

BETTER DAYS WHEN THE BOSS IS AWAY

Thus the job went on. I dreaded going to the office every day and dealing with Jackie, but the job had some pluses. I developed great friendships by commiserating with other members of Jackie's staff. Jackie took three business trips to Hawaii during the eight months I worked with him, and life at the office was really beautiful during his absence. I clung to the job in hopes that maybe things with Jackie would get better. We all hated him; maybe that fact would force him to change. Or maybe he'd get another job. There were lots of medical trade magazines out there.

After eight months, it all became moot: Another company bought the magazine, and we were all laid off.

I still wonder, though: Was there a way I could have improved my working relationship with Jackie? Should I have gone over Barry's head to complain? Or is there no point in complaining in a situation where the boss hasn't committed any abuse apart from being an incredible jerk?

**This story is true. The author's name and other names and identifying details in the story have been changed.*

Analysis: The Jerk Isn't Gonna Change

Once it was clear problems with a toxic boss weren't going to be remedied, the employee should have taken stronger action: leaving

During the eight months that Anne Kelly,* a senior editor at a trade magazine, grappled with Jackie Pebble—a bullying boss who barely communicated except to disparage at 130 decibels—she took a stab at improving things by complaining to his superior. The superior, Barry, the publisher of the magazine, empathetically stated Anne should look for another job if she found Jackie too difficult. Nonetheless, she clung to the job for eight months, until another corporation acquired the publication and got rid of the entire existing staff.

Did she do right? According to career coaches, yes and no. While some of the steps she took were reasonable, she neglected to try a measure or two that might have helped. On the plus side, she didn't blame herself for Jackie's toxicity.

"She was aware that he was behaving inappropriately, and she didn't take it personally," says Phyllis Rosen, a Manhattan career and executive coach. "At least she didn't take on that stress. In a situation like this, I would suggest she give her boss a story outline before writing a story, and it sounds as though she was already doing that."

THE RISK OF BEING LABELED A COMPLAINER

While complaining to her boss's boss didn't yield any results, it wasn't necessarily a bad move. "If she makes it known that the boss is a jerk, and then other people complain about him down the line, she's started something good," says Joel Garfinkle, president of Garfinkle Executive Coaching in Oakland, Calif. "On the other hand, if she complains to multiple people and no one else knows the boss is a jerk yet, she could be branded a complainer."

Before going over Jackie's head with her grievance, she could have tried talking to him directly, says Chason Hecht, president of the Manhattan firm Retensa Retention Specialists. "First, you set up a time to have a conversation about the work environment," he explains. "Once you're in that conversation, you say, 'I really appreciate a lot of good things here, but this isn't the best environment for me to succeed in serving you.' That way, you've modified 'there's something wrong with you' to 'hey, let's win this game together.'"

If there's no change in his behavior—or only a temporary modification—a trip to human resources is an option. "Express to HR the value you find in the company and that this situation with your boss isn't getting better," Hecht says. "Ask HR what the 'chain of actions' to your complaint will be. You could also say you've seen the boss treat other employees badly. This may be a boss HR doesn't want in the company anyway, so it may be the opportunity they've been looking for."

A LITTLE MORE TIME COULD HAVE HELPED

Indeed, if the company has no formal 360-degree feedback policy, a program whereby subordinates hand in written critiques of their superiors, your visit to HR could break new ground.

Another option might have worked if she'd had a little more time at the job: acquiring internal "advocates" who can advise and assist. "You want to establish relationships with people higher up in the company," Garfinkle says. "You want these higher-up people to see how much knowhow you have and what a valuable resource you are. These would be people you could pull in and explain the problem with your boss to, and see if they can help."

What about the boss's abuses like making his subordinates lay out cash for business expenses even when he was there with his own corporate card? Well, Anne just needed to suck it up. "You've got to know when to pick your battles," says Garfinkle. "This is something annoying but petty enough not to make an issue of."

A TOXIC CORPORATE CULTURE

All the experts we consulted said another solid option would simply have been to start job-hunting after two months of her start date, once it became obvious Jackie wasn't going to change.

"She needed to get out of there," Garfinkle says. "'My boss talks to me that way all the time' is a hard line to hear. This person is saying that the culture here is that most people are jerks."

Indeed, the writing was on the wall. "When the publisher told her she should look for another job," says Rosen, "she should have believed him."

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