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Dealing With Bosses Who Think They Are Smartest

Strategies you can try to get your points across with leaders who always know best

BY SUSAN LUCIA ANNUNZIO

Have you ever worked for—or with—a leader who truly believes they are the smartest person in the room?

These people are often charismatic and dynamic, able to draw people in with their passion and energy. But they also assume anyone who disagrees with them is incompetent, delusional or even a saboteur, so they reject their opinions and ideas out of hand. They may ask for others' input and give lip service to their ideas, but it quickly becomes clear that "it's my way or the highway."

This behavior has long-term consequences. It prompts other team members to drop out of the discussion or withhold information, fearing that they will be belittled if they speak up. As a result, better ideas never see the light of day; product defects are covered up; unethical practices continue unchecked; deals are thwarted.

If your boss acts like the "smartest guy" and you aren't ready to quit your job, there are actions you can take to benefit both you and the company. None of these are guaranteed to work but they will give you a fighting chance.

Avoid power struggles

Don't be afraid to express your opinions, but avoid engaging in power struggles with your boss. You may think that if you present facts and data to support your viewpoint, you can convince the smartest person that you are right and they are wrong. But in a power struggle, the boss always wins.

Even if your boss dismisses your viewpoint or idea, it may spark something positive. One executive client I worked with told me his boss always called his ideas "stupid." He said, "At first, I'd try to reason with her and explain my thinking. Eventually, I realized there was no point—because often, two or three days later, she'd return enthusiastically to tell me about her new idea, which was the very same one I'd suggested earlier."

Ask questions

If you want to challenge your boss, try raising thoughtful, nonconfrontational questions that illuminate risks or unintended consequences of a plan or decision. For example: "If we do this, could it prevent us from reaching the

revenue target because x, y and z might happen?" Or, "Is it possible that this decision might unintentionally hurt morale?" Approaching the conversation in this way might allow the smartest person to conclude on his or her own that the plan could be improved.

Build allies

Don't push back on the boss by yourself. ^{Note} Before key discussions, connect with colleagues who may have more influence than you do, and who recognize the leader's behavior as destructive. A coordinated effort—where multiple voices present a viewpoint—creates credibility and increases the odds for success.

Protect yourself

If the above suggestions aren't successful, you may have to accept that there are some things you can't change—and you need to find a new job. I've seen talented, brilliant executives whose confidence has been shaken by the continual rejection of their thoughts and ideas. Don't fall into that trap. Instead, take what you can from the experience and quietly prepare for what's next.

First, give priority to your physical and mental health, especially if you are experiencing high levels of stress. Eat well, get enough sleep and make time to exercise or practice meditation. Do your job well, but don't do more.

Give up on getting credit and focus your efforts on executing the "boss's ideas," which in some cases might actually be your own. When your organization enjoys success because of your efforts, celebrate it—even if "the smartest person" insists on taking the bow.

And remember, even the toughest boss can be a teacher. Sometimes we learn more about what *not* to do than what to do. You know what it feels like to be ignored, undervalued and disrespected, which will help you avoid treating people that way when you are in a position of authority.

Bosses are invested with legitimate power, but no single person has all the answers. Leaders who think they do are sorely mistaken. *Susan Lucia Annunzio is a leadership coach, author and president and CEO of the Center for High Performance. She also is an associate adjunct professor of management at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business.*

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