

Help! Save My Career!

by Donald Asher, America's Job Search Guru

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Dear Guru Don:

I need a serious reality check. I read advice from smart career advisers like you, but it doesn't jibe with my experience, either present or past. The articles and columns most often say that to do well professionally and get ahead you should work hard, perform loyally for the boss, and keep a good schedule. The advice seems to make sense, except in my world where the opposite is true. It's almost as if I live (and work) in an alternate universe.

I work as a professional for a small company. My boss manages a group of ten within the company. Most of the group are incompetent, waste time, and make too many mistakes. A few on the staff are smart and do the lion's share of the work, which of course includes fixing the problems the others create. It seems to me that this rewards poor performance and punishes the few who work hard. The boss tells us that we should arrive on time for work but he is hardly ever on time. He even makes fun of HR when they remind the workers of the company schedule. Yet he never punishes anyone who comes in late or leaves early. However, he will make a snide comment to a worker who keeps to the correct schedule but wants to take a justified vacation day. He promotes workers who clearly don't deserve it and holds back of those who do.

This boss hired his wife's sister's son into a position for which he is not qualified. The nephew is a slacker who makes work for others and contributes little to our production. In fact, the boss has to find things for him to do and I have to fix his mistakes. The boss's management style consists of playing one worker off another. He lets us get disgruntled with each other in this crazy environment and then he tries to play the beneficent mediator. I won't even go into his touchy-feely, creepy-old-man behavior. He doesn't know I think he's a pig.

But the whole company is like this, including HR. And my previous company functioned like this. So, be honest. What is really normal? Are the journalists and career folk just feeding me a bunch of crap about hard work, fairness, and performance just to sell me books? Or does hard work pay off somewhere? Or should I become a mediocre worker?

Sign me, Completely Frustrated

Dear Completely:

First of all, thanks for slapping me upside the face about giving advice as if the working world were a rational and just place. You are absolutely right. The work world is often unfair, irrational, counterintuitive, and just plain dumb. In my defense, however, I do give advice on how to deal with crazy bosses. Often, that advice is to get the heck away from them.

There are two ways I can respond to your query. One is to take you at face value, and guess that everything you say is correct and accurately perceived. In that case, you need a new job. There is no other solution for you. Since you say the whole company is like this, including HR, there is no hope in this organization. It's time to plot your exit.

Bad bossing is incredibly common, and research shows that most people do not leave bad companies or bad jobs; they leave bad bosses. So it costs industry billions to allow these people to infest their ranks. For more on the phenomenon of bad vs. good bosses, see Buckingham and Coffman's *First, Break All the Rules*. But you have more than a bad boss; you have a two-time record of landing in bad organizations.

I can assure you that there is indeed an alternate universe that you have not had the good fortune to find, and in that universe talent and contributions are acknowledged and rewarded. Maybe it's like marriage. Just because half of marriages don't work out doesn't mean there aren't happy marriages out there somewhere. So maybe you have just been unlucky.

[following could be a balloon]

Confidential to "Crystal" in Chicago: Do *not* have sex with your boss. This will end badly. You have carried this far enough, and you have to shut down the flirtation and give up your special privileges, or you may need more than a new wardrobe!

[end sidebar or balloon]

On the other hand, let me imagine that you are not reporting all of the situation at work completely accurately. I can see that your work style does not advance your boss's agenda. His agenda, *whatever it is*, is not in alignment with yours. He may not care when people come and go because in the knowledge economy, punching the clock may not be relevant to getting work done. His role of smoothing staff discord may be more necessary than you are willing to acknowledge. And, just for the record, are you the source of any of that discord? And are you sure he doesn't know full well that you think he's a pig?

Smart, highly talented, hardworking employees sometimes get "completely frustrated" in organizations where their talents and work ethic are not the norm. But then, over time, they become part of the problem, part of the cause of a poisonous work atmosphere. My advice is not to become a mediocre worker. It is to seek more fertile soil in which to plant your career, someplace where smart, hardworking people who show up on time is the norm. And yes, I assure you, it is out there.

My best wishes for your continued success.

QUESTION NO. 2:

Dear Guru Don:

I've got a weird one for you. I am a landlord, and I usually have a handyman or two on my payroll. One fellow I've been working with wants to work for cash only. He's legal to work and all, but this guy wants paid every time he leaves a job site. Every day, in cash. If he goes home for lunch, he wants paid for the morning! I have to carry a lot of change to make sure I can pay him accurately. Otherwise, he is an excellent worker. What do you think of this?

Sign me, Carrying the Cash

Dear Cash and Carry:

I think he is on the lam from the police, the IRS or an ex-wife! Or, maybe, his last employer stiffed him for a paycheck. If his work is excellent, and you have the patience to deal with his quirks, just deal with it. You are your business, so you can set policy any way you want. One warning, though: be sure to pay taxes on this guy, fair and square, or you will have the chance to pay them after he is long gone, and keep workers' comp in effect or you are, unwittingly, self insured. Many people who pay people "under the counter" create expense and risk they cannot imagine. So stay legal or regret it.

My best wishes for your continued success,

Donald Asher

Send your career emergency to don@donaldasher.com, and watch this space for Asher's response.

BIO: Donald Asher is a nationally known writer and speaker on careers and higher education. He is the author of eleven books, including *Cracking the Hidden Job Market*; *How to Get Any Job: Life Launch and Re-Launch for Everyone Under 30*; *Graduate Admissions Essays*, the best-selling guide to the graduate admissions process; *Asher's Bible of Executive Resumes*; *Cool Colleges for the Hyper-Intelligent, Self-Directed, Late Blooming, and Just Plain Different*; and *Who Gets Promoted, Who Doesn't, and Why* (named Business Book of the Year 2008 by national career columnist Joyce Lain Kennedy). Asher speaks over 100 days a year from coast to coast, to college and corporate audiences. He is eager to hear your career emergency.