

The Worst Boss in the World

By Justin Locke
December 7, 2010

Advisor Perspectives welcomes guest contributions. The views presented here do not necessarily represent those of Advisor Perspectives.

Like most people, I love working for a good boss. They facilitate, they expedite, they inspire, and they pay you too. Unbelievable.

Since good bosses are the exception and not the rule, however, early in my professional life I decided to strike out and work for myself. It was an alternative that sounded great on paper, but there's one little thing that I wish someone had told me: When you work for yourself, you are working for many clients, and they are often the worst bosses imaginable.



Don't get me wrong: I absolutely adore all of my clients (well, most of them). After all, without them, I would starve. But even the best client can be a terrible manager.

How so? Let me count the ways.

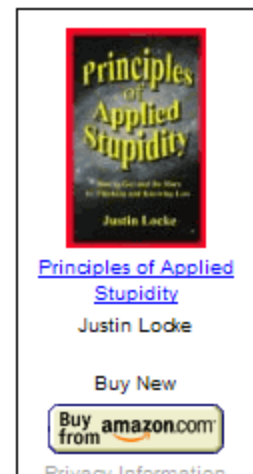
A good manager will create structure, keep you constantly busy but not overworked, and pay you regularly. A client sometimes comes forward with unpredictable demands, while at others leaving you extended periods of absolute monotony, during which no money comes in.

A good boss will occasionally sit you down and give you a performance review, complete with tips and hints on how to improve yourself. Some of them will even take courses on how to better communicate with you.

A client, on the other hand, will rarely say anything about your services unless you directly ask them, and even then, they often consider giving you feedback to be a waste of their time and energy.

When you make a mistake or do something wrong, a half-decent boss will correct you. A client will, in some rare instances, throw a screaming fit at you, but most of the time they will not fire you or say anything; they will just accept you as you are. To them, putting up with you is often easier than finding someone else. It's easy to interpret their silence as satisfaction, even when it may be enabling mediocrity.

When a manager fires you, they will do it face-to-face. A client will fire you just by





forgetting about you. With a client-boss, it could be years before you know you're fired.

Because my clients make such poor managers, I do my best not to think of them as my bosses, even though in reality they may be. Dealing with clients properly is hard enough work without your thinking of them as your boss.

When it comes to clients, what you really must do is occasionally manage *them*. Rather than merely passively acting upon specific orders as you would from a boss, you have to try to anticipate a client's desires. Sometimes you have to take the time to persuade them to do what's right for themselves or their own business, as sometimes what they say they want is not in their best interest. You have to accept that, at least some of the time, you know a whole lot more than your clients about certain things. You have to spend a fair amount of time educating them, in a way you never would a boss.

It took me a long time to understand the subtle intricacies of managing clients, and I am still learning. I had plenty of training how to manage people I am paying in a top-down manner; those clear hierarchies of authority made things very simple. This new world of managing paying clients is anything but.

I confess: I sometimes long for those halcyon grade school days, when life was a simple prefab daily procedure and you had one "boss" for the academic year. You couldn't be fired (unless you *really* messed up, and even then, a three-day vacation was more likely than actually being expelled). You could talk back all you want, or do terrible substandard work, and still, state law required them to bring you back every day at eight o'clock and deal with you. Obviously, none of that experience prepared me for real life.

The lesson I have to re-teach myself every day is that in a business-to-client model, the "authority figure" no longer exists. Neither one of us is an authority figure any more. While I hated authority when I was growing up, I always secretly liked the structure – if for no other reason than it provided someone else to blame. Now that crutch is gone. Working with clients has to be a team effort. It's not a question of who is working for whom; it is really a question of where you are working toward together. Rather than brute force authority, it's about the relationship. It's about cultivating mutual appreciation and respect. It's also a mash-up of different skills. They have some, you have others.

Also, my many client-bosses each have to deal with their own (often irrational) customer-bosses themselves, so it turns out we have a lot more in common than we thought.

I now get hired by a different boss almost every day. It's wacky, it's disorganized, and it's inefficient, but I'll say this: It's always a challenge, it's never boring, and I wouldn't want it any other way.



Justin Locke is a speaker based in Boston. He spent 18 seasons playing the bass with the Boston Pops, and he is the author of several books, including "Real Men Don't Rehearse" (a musical memoir) and "Principles of Applied Stupidity," a look at how to be more productive and effective by going against the conventional wisdom. He will be speaking in Lowell, MA on Oct. 7th, 2010. See more by visiting his website at www.justinlocke.com.

www.advisorperspectives.com

For a free subscription to the Advisor Perspectives newsletter, visit:
<http://www.advisorperspectives.com/subscribers/subscribe.php>