

How Not to Murder Your Boss, Avoid Prison Time, and Live a Happier Life

By Steven J. Curley, PhD

Part One: Introduction and Know Who You Are

It can be a pleasing fantasy, but prison food is bad, the company leaves a lot to be desired, and prison orange is just not your color...

Hello all. My name is Steve Curley, PhD. I am a licensed psychologist in private practice in Mountain View, CA. I am starting this blog to share at least some of the work I do and hopefully give some insight and inspiration to those who read my blog. I hope what I have to say is helpful and provokes further thought, growth, and action.

Of course many, hopefully most bosses are very good at what they do and treat their team members and everyone well. But this blog series is not about them. It is about those who can't or won't live up to this standard. I am always amazed and disappointed when I experience or hear of bosses/supervisors/team leaders who exhibit such poor behavior and attitudes in regards to their positions. Perhaps I am idealist, but I always want people to be treated with compassion, understanding, and empathy. This is often not the case. I am sure I am preaching to the choir. There is a reason the comic strip "Dilbert" has been so successful. Leadership positions do not always attract true leaders and corporate culture does not always foster true leadership. This is unfortunate on so many levels. Malicious or misguided behavior may be rewarded and genuine growth, productivity, and learning may be squelched. How does one respond to these stressful situations?

The change starts with you. I know this may be scary. Change and challenging authority often is. The good news is that you are an adult capable of making intelligent well-informed

decisions and who can act in your best interest. In this series of blogs, I hope to give you a framework to make your own decisions and actions towards a happy and fair workplace environment. Each individual must make their own assessments and decisions as to what is best for them. If you feel you need more help than what this blog can provide, I hope you will contact me and schedule an appointment for doing individual work with me. My website is www.drstevenjcurley.com.

Below is a brief outline of the series of blogs on dealing with difficult bosses. While these blogs are aimed at difficult work situations, the information is also applicable to friendships, romantic relationships, and familial relationships.

- Part One – Know thyself. You are the agent for the changes you wish. This begins with knowing who you are and what you want.
- Part Two – Acting with integrity. Being treated fairly necessitates treating others fairly.
- Part Three – Not taking things personally.
- Part Four – The power of choice. You have more choices than you may think.
- Part Five – Asking for what you want.
- Part Six – Knowing when it is time to leave and summary.

Now that I've introduced myself and given you a brief overview of what I hope to accomplish, let's get started with Part One, Know Thyself.

In order to be able to work out a conflict with another person, one first needs to understand one's self. This understanding is the baseline from which you are operating. It is what will ground you in working out the conflict and serve as a reference point from which to engage the person you are in conflict with. Without this reference point you are lost and cannot effectively assert yourself or even know what is the root of the conflict.

Here are some very important questions to ask yourself:

- What are your strengths? What are you good at personally and professionally? This includes interpersonal skills as well as psychological skills such as self-soothing, not taking things personally, patience, and empathy (the ability to imagine another's feelings, perspectives, position).
- What are your growth edges? What do you find difficult or scary? What would you like to be better at or admire in others?
- Why are you working in this particular job? What do you like about it? What don't you like it? Why this job? Why this company? What do you gain by being here? What is the cost of being here?
- What do you need to be your most creative, productive, effective self in your job? Scheduling needs? Environmental needs? Communication needs?
- What makes you feel valued as an employee? Money? Responsibility? Trust? Recognition? Respect? Why?
- What are you moving towards in your professional and personal lives? What would you like to be doing personally and professionally in a year? Five years? Promotion? Career change? Marriage? Children? Going back to school? Retirement?
- What are your boundaries? Where do you draw the line as to what is acceptable to you personally and professionally? What isn't? Healthy boundaries are vital to happy, healthy relationships, be they professional or personal.

I suggest you take some time and write out the answers to the above questions. If you are having trouble doing this, I would invite you to contact me to see if some individual time with me would help you with this process. I hope this has been of use to you all.

I invite you to check out next week's installment, Acting with Integrity. Thank you.

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Part Two: Acting with Integrity

Last week I discussed our starting point, know thyself. Hopefully, you were able to answer the questions I posed to you and have a good reference point to continue. Our next topic is “Acting with Integrity.”

“Be the change you wish to see in the world.” – Mahatma Gandhi

It can be very tempting, especially when one is stressed and not being treated fairly or respectfully, to respond to bad behavior with more bad behavior. However, whatever short-term satisfaction you may experience in acting out, the long-term cost is likely to far outweigh it. As the title of my blog alludes to, you would not be the first person to imagine doing physical harm to your tormentor. This is best left for your fantasy life and has no place beyond that. Antagonizing the person who wields power over your professional life is not a great career move and is unlikely to get you what you want.

This means taking the high road, even when your boss is wallowing in the muck. The Golden Rule certainly applies. This bit of perennial wisdom is seen in most if not all religions, spiritual traditions, and ethical codes. One wording of it is, “Do unto others, as you would have them do unto you.” A more modern version is, “Treat others as you wish to be treated yourself.”

Responding to inappropriate behavior with appropriate behavior may well encourage the other person to behave more appropriately. Even if it does not, it is still worth doing. Behaving appropriately protects you. If the matter goes to Human Resources or a higher-level boss you cannot easily be faulted. It

also puts into sharp contrast, your boss' inappropriate behavior. Lastly, I believe acting ethically and appropriately is important in and of itself. There are psychological and social costs to bad behavior, and frankly our world would be a much nicer place if more people chose to act more kindly more of the time.

What may make it easier to act with integrity is to remember that your boss is human too. We all have our bad days, our ups and our downs. Is what is happening between the two of you a one-off or temporary? Is it out of character for your boss, or is it a pattern? We often do not know what is going on in our bosses' lives. Perhaps they are going through a divorce, or a loved one is dying? Maybe their boss is putting a great deal of pressure on them? Maybe they are just having one of those days? I am not trying to excuse bad behavior, but they are always a reason for it, and one that deserves compassion and understanding. This is just a possibility to hold that may make acting with integrity easier for you.

I hope this discussion has been helpful and thought provoking. If any of the above is proving difficult to enact, and you wish some individual help with it, I hope you will contact me through my website, www.drstevenjcurley.com.

Next week, I will blog in Part Three, about a related topic: Not Taking Things Personally. See you then.

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Part Three: Do Not Take Things Personally

Last week I discussed the benefits of acting with integrity. This can be challenging when under duress. This week I will be writing about a related topic that may make acting ethically and appropriately easier for you. Let's talk about not taking things personally.

Let me be up front about this, this one can be hard to do. We all have our vulnerabilities, our “buttons.” Getting your buttons pushed, especially unexpectedly, can put us in a very wounded and defensive place. For some of us, that means retreating from the situation, for others it means fighting back in an inappropriate or unproductive way.

Part of not taking things personally is knowing yourself. I discussed this in the first blog of this series. In that blog I asked you to answer a series of questions about who you are and what you want. The part of you that answered those questions is a very important part of you. It is the part of you that knows what you know, what you feel, and what you think. In meditation traditions this *meta* part of yourself is called the observer. In psychology we call it the observing ego. It is a very important part of yourself that can take a neutral position and referee all the confusing and possible conflicting parts of yourself and the person you are in conflict with.

Take a moment, when you are comfortable and free of distractions, and sit comfortably. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Sit for about a minute with your eyes closed. Count how many thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations you feel during that minute. If you are like most people, it was a surprisingly high number! The part of you that did the noticing and counting is your observing ego.

Here are some tips on not taking things personally that involve using your observing ego. By the way, using your observing ego is called “mindfulness.” It is all the rage today but has been an important part of many religions, spiritual traditions, and martial arts for thousands of years.

- What part of this interaction is mine and what part is not mine? It takes two to tango as the saying goes. What expectations, beliefs, desires, behaviors of mine are making this situation

better or worse? What is my partner in this interaction contributing?

- Is there any truth in what is being said to me? Sometimes the truth hurts. Sometimes it is hard to hear the truth. However, it pays to be honest with yourself. Sometimes people see what we do not want to see about ourselves or our situation.
- How might my past be shaping how I perceive or act in this situation? Does this situation remind you of others you have experienced? Are those experiences adding emotional charge to the current situation? Is your response to the current situation commensurate to what is really happening now?
- Focus on behaviors (yours/theirs) not on personalities. You do not have to like someone to get along with them. Focusing on behaviors allows you to take things less personally and to not act out in inappropriate or unproductive ways.
- Concentrate on the message not its delivery. I'm not suggesting you ignore abusive or coercive language. I am suggesting that you focus on what is trying to be communicated despite a clumsy or inappropriate delivery.
- What is the big picture here? What do I hope to achieve in this interaction? What are my priorities and what is less important?

The ability to do the above can greatly aid you in work and in your other relationships. The first three tips are also areas that are ripe for exploration and work in individual psychotherapy. If that interests you, feel free to contact me through my website www.drstevenjcurley.com.

Next week, in part four of this series, I will discuss the power of choice and how it can help you at work. Thank you and see you next week.

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Part Four: The Power of Choice

Last week I wrote about not taking things personally. That is a

choice. The power of choice is this week's topic of interest.

Often we feel like we have no choice, especially if our boss is giving us a hard time. Regaining our sense of choice can be an important part of reclaiming our personal power and feeling better about our work situation and ourselves. This points to a related psychological concept called "locus of control," developed by Julian Rotter. The locus of control is where we locate the power involved in any interaction. If the locus of control is internal, we own the power in the interaction. If the locus of control is external, we are giving the power to someone or something outside of ourselves. Often the locus may be split or shared between parties.

People who habitually operate from a place of external locus of control may be anxious, frustrated, angry, and depressed. People who have a stronger internal locus of control tend to be happier, more productive, and less anxious or depressed.

Obviously, our bosses have some power over us. However, that does not negate our own power. This is where choice comes in. One choice you made is to accept your current job. You could choose to be in another job. You can choose to focus on what you like about your job and choose to be happy at work. Conversely, you can choose to focus on what you dislike about your job. What we focus on often helps determine how happy or satisfied we are. We can fixate on what we cannot change leading to anxiety, dissatisfaction, and a sense of powerlessness, or we can focus on what we can change for the better and act on this. This is your job and your life, how do you want to view it? The Serenity Prayer used in 12-Step groups points to the wisdom and benefits of changing what you can for the better and letting go of what is not in your control. This is a recipe for sanity.

We can choose to take things personally or not. We can choose

to treat ourselves and our co-workers with respect and kindness or not. We can own our power or give it away. All choices have consequences, even the choice not to choose. Why not choose the beliefs, attitudes, and actions that make your life happier, healthier, and more prosperous?

Play with this idea of choice. Notice the choices you make. Notice how it feels to make them and what the emotional and relational consequences that follow. Know that some choices, even when they are the right ones, can be hard, especially in the short term.

Next week I will be writing about asking for what you want, an important job and life skill. Have a good week and make good choices.

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Part Five: Asking for What You Want
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Asking for what we want, some people excel at this and others struggle with it. Of those who struggle, some believe themselves unworthy; some grew up believing it was selfish to ask for one's wants and needs to be met. Perhaps it is a cultural issue. The reality is that we all have wants and needs, and that it is okay to pursue your interests in an appropriate way. If you don't believe this, you might like some individual therapy to help you with this (www.drstevenjcurley.com).

The first step to asking for what you want is to know what you want. Hopefully your work in part one of this blog series may have brought this into clearer focus. If you haven't read part one, it might be worth your while to do so now.

So now you know what you want. Now what? Prioritize your

wants and needs. What do you need now? What can wait? What can you live without? What is most important to you? Approaching your boss with a laundry list of wants and needs is less likely to get you what you want. Can you imagine someone in your life presenting you with 15-20 requests all at once? How likely would that person get those requests granted? How would you perceive that person for asking so much all at once? Additionally, your boss is likely to have other employees with wants and needs of their own. So, pick one or two things to ask for based on your priorities.

Do your best to understand your boss' perspective, wants, needs, and resources available to him or her. Bosses need things too and do not have unlimited power or resources to grant requests. Remember your boss is human like you.

Sell your request to your boss. How will getting what you want help the team, your boss, and the company?

What can you do to make it easier for your boss to give you what you want? Is there a concession you are willing to make or extra duties you could perform?

Be willing to negotiate and make counter-offers. Aim for a win-win solution rather than playing a zero-sum game. Remember part two: Acting with Integrity. Remember to not take it personally.

Take the time to know what you want, to understand your boss' needs and wants, to know how to best sell your request, to know what you are willing to give in order to get what you want before you ask. Then, be open to negotiation and finding a win-win solution with your boss.

Next week will be the last in this series of blogs. I will discuss knowing when it is time to leave your job, as well provide a short

review of the series, and some tips on knowing when you might benefit from individual therapy concerning these issues. Have a good week.

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Part Six: Knowing When It Is Time to Leave

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So, you have been able to put into practice my advice so far and nothing much seems to be changing for the better? I'm not there so I don't really know how well you have been able to act on my suggestions. Change takes time, effort, and practice. The suggestions I've made so far can be difficult to enact, and enact skillfully. Be patient and don't give up.

However, one needs to know when enough is enough and it is time to leave for a position that better suits our needs. Where is that line? It is different for everyone. Does your job negatively impact your mental health, either causing mental illness or exacerbating a pre-existing condition? Is your physical health being impacted? Hypertension, poor sleep, weight gain or loss, headaches, GI problems? These are signs that a choice needs to be made, either find a way to be at your job healthily or move on. Please consult a physician and/or a therapist if your mental or physical health is suffering.

Are your relationships suffering due to your work? Are you fighting with your partner more? Are you having a tough time parenting? Do you get to see your friends? Maybe you just don't feel you have the time or energy to devote to your relationships due to work demands and stress? Maybe work stress is killing your desire to have sex?

You may not know if you need to leave. A therapist could help you sort through your situation and help you make the right

choice for you. A physician can help you with your health problems.

Can the situation be remedied? Would talking to your co-workers, boss, or HR help? Is this an opportunity for personal and professional growth, or is it a no-win situation for you? Are your personal issues getting in the way of your job being a positive experience for you? Would changing jobs change that fact?

What is your financial reality? Can you afford to be temporarily unemployed and for how long? What are your other job options? Do your research and don't act hastily.

Is this a sign it is time to change careers? Would you be happy working in the same field, but at another company? If not, what would you like to do instead? Do want to work for yourself? Explore and research these things. What experience and/or education would your new career entail? What are the financial consequences of changing careers? How might this impact your partner or family? Get good information to make good choices for yourself and those who depend upon you.

In my professional and personal opinion, physical and mental health are far more precious than any job or amount of money. You have the power to become more self-aware and to make better, more informed choices. You can take the actions you need to have a happy, healthy and successful work life.

In way of summary, here are some important points to remember to help you be happy wherever your career takes you:

- You have the power to make choices.
- Perspective matters.
- Act on what is within your control.

- Don't take things personally.
- Be sure your personal life is meaningful and rewarding. Work is not your whole life.
- At the end of your day, week, year, or life, what are you going to be grateful for or glad of? What are you going to regret? Choose accordingly.

This concludes my six-part series on making your work life a happier one. I've enjoyed sharing my perspective on this topic with you. I hope it will be useful to you. If, in reading this series, you find that you would like some professional help in achieving your goals or working through what is holding you back, I hope you will contact me at info@drstevenjcurley.com or call me at 408-886-4269. Thank you.