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How Young Attorneys Can Handle A Toxic Boss

By [Cara Bayles](#) | 2023-10-13 14:03:13 -0400 · [Listen to article](#)

Soon after Jennifer began her first job after law school, it became apparent that she was working for a yeller.

Older associates had warned her that the partner she reported to was mercurial, and often communicated at a volume that was "sometimes terrifying," said Jennifer, who asked to use a pseudonym to protect her identity.

But she had graduated into a recession, and felt she couldn't turn down work. Also, the partner was overseeing a big trial that she considered "the big show," an amazing opportunity for a young associate. The trial and its aftermath also involved working long hours and weekends, all while being screamed at for things as mundane as a printer not printing fast enough.

"I tried ignoring the yelling and instead, finding the tidbits of constructive criticism. ... I really tried to compartmentalize. Obviously that's easier said than done," Jennifer told Law360. "Every morning I'd wake up with a stomachache. It was not a healthy environment, and I knew that. But it was literally just, 'Get through this case, get through this work, and try to find other work.'"

The toxic boss is hardly extinct, in spite of the "great resignation" forcing a reckoning at firms seeking to prevent an exodus of talent, according to Annie Little, a former real estate finance attorney and the founder of JD Nation LLC, a legal career strategy company.

"It's a very unprofessional profession," she told Law360. "Lawyers do not have business training. They don't have management training. Law firms are a horrendous business model."

Things are getting better, however, according to Sharon Abrahams, founder of [Legal Talent Advisors LLC](#), which advises both lawyers and law firms. She attributes a cultural shift at firms to the younger lawyers coming in, who she said believe in setting boundaries and seeking out mentors.

"I don't think there's more toxic behavior. I just think people are addressing it," she said. "If you look at the traditionalists and you look at the baby boomers, we were taught not to contradict authority. And now with the younger generation — Gen Z, millennials — asking for feedback and asking for assistance doesn't have the taboo that it used to have."

Still, young attorneys can find it challenging to speak up or know how to address the toxic or abusive behaviors of their bosses. So Law360 consulted experts on how best to handle a difficult boss.

It's Them, Not You

It's hard to know ahead of time how a new job will pan out, according to Emily Stedman, a senior associate at [Husch Blackwell LLP](#) and an advocate for lawyer well-being. A firm can be strong culturally, but an associate might find themselves siloed in a poorly run practice group, or reporting to a particularly toxic manager.

"You can't always predict it, you don't always see it coming," she said. "It requires taking a step back and knowing that it's not your fault, that the associate hasn't necessarily done anything wrong by walking into a firm that has a culture that doesn't feel like it's a good fit."

Young attorneys question whether they're good enough when they end up working with a demanding boss, Little said. But sometimes partners are just as insecure and overwhelmed as associates, and feel, in spite of their power, that they have about as much agency as much younger attorneys.

"It's not an excuse, but it's an explanation that the person that you're working for that's awful — it's entirely possible that they're also in a very untenable situation, and they don't have the coping skills for themselves, let alone the management skills to help you," she said. "In most cases, it's not you, it's them. That can give you a little peace of mind."

It can also help to understand where that toxic behavior is coming from, Abrahams said. Often, partners have tantrums because they feel as if they are the victims.

Abrahams once encountered a partner who was yelling at his assistants. She soon learned that the firm, where he'd worked for decades, was pushing attorneys to go paperless and do everything online, and he felt left behind. His anger was fueled by frustration, she said, and he needed "more hand holding" to learn how to navigate the new technology.

"The guy was just being very aggressive with his staff, because he was frightened all the time," she said. "A lot of lawyers don't like to admit when they're wrong, or that they don't know something, or that they've made a mistake. And so that will come out as aggression, even when they're frustrated. And so if the junior person can see what the reason is for the behavior, they can then talk to the partner."

Find a Confidant

Venting to other lawyers and getting advice on how to handle a toxic manager can make a huge difference for a young associate and make the experience of working for the manager less lonely.

It can be heartening to hear that other people have gone through the same thing, or can recognize the difficulties of working for an abusive boss.

"If you're at a larger firm, see if you can find other associates who have worked with the person or a senior associate or young partner who just appears more approachable. If you have a firm mentor, that's usually a good place to start," Stedman said.

Associates often know who they'd like to talk to but are afraid to speak up because they don't want to bother the person, but the right people won't consider it a burden, she said.

Attorneys at other firms make great confidants, too, Stedman said, because "it's not going go into the gossip mill at your firm, and it helps you know 'Is this unique to my firm or is this something people experience everywhere?'"

Young lawyers can also go to their firm's human resources department to raise issues, get advice or seek a medical sabbatical, Little said, though she added that at some firms, HR is not trustworthy and tends to side with partners.

She added that before attorneys even hire a career coach like her, they ought to find a therapist to confide in.

"Pretty much every lawyer needs a therapist," she said. "It can really help with the demoralizing

that happens when you work for somebody like this."

Say Something

When coping with toxic managers, communication is key, according to Abrahams: "It's just the same as marriage counseling."

She recommends that young attorneys who are trying to reason with unreasonable bosses use the template of "I, we, it" statements.

For example, she said, an associate might say, "I feel that you don't respect the quality of work that I provide you when you yell and scream, throw things and belittle my work. But we need to work better together. I enjoy the work that I do for you, and we can come up with a solution. What do we need to do to get it — what should we do to get this remedy?"

She also recommended that junior associates hone their emotional intelligence — that is, the ability to recognize their own reactions to someone else's behavior, to understand how to manage those emotions, then try to understand why the other person acts the way he does, and manage the relationship.

"I have to have the social awareness to look at that behavior and sort of dissect it a little bit and say, 'What's going on?'" she said. "Then I need to say, 'All right, partner, you've redlined this document. You've written lots of X's and exclamation points. I really feel frustrated that I don't understand how to write your voice. Can you sit with me for a few minutes? Can I buy you a cup of coffee, so that I could just better understand how you want me to write things for you?' And who could say no to that?"

Partners often lose track of how much associates have on their plate, especially those who are reporting to more than one boss. It can be helpful to communicate that to a partner, and ask for advice on how to triage the work, Little said.

"As long as they're aware that you're working for multiple people, which they usually are, you can say, 'Listen, I've got this thing with Partner 1. And I know that this thing you're giving me, Partner 2, is super important. Could you talk to Partner 1 about this?'" she said. "That's a partner-level discussion, and it's not fair to make somebody navigate that when they don't have the same power."

Another way associates can ask for what they need is by seeking the greater context of an