

Negotiating Ground Rules with a Problematic Boss.

There are clear benefits to having agreed ground rules with your boss. If you both know what the other expects and needs in order to function at their best, you can avoid a lot of problems e.g. it is much easier to give my boss bad news if they have told me in advance that for them, the best way to do this is to send them a briefing email, then give them 30mins to think (and calm down!) and then call into their office to discuss what has happened. Clear agreements are particularly important if your boss is 'problematic' and unfortunately it is also much more difficult to negotiate this sort of agreement with a problematic boss.

The more difficult the conversation is likely to be, the more time you need to spend preparing for the discussion.

In your preparation, first consider in what way this conversation is likely to be problematic. Does your boss just have poor interpersonal/management skills or are they [personality disordered](#)? If your boss has significant narcissistic or antisocial personality disorder, I can confidently advise you that you would be wise to start looking for other positions. This is unlikely to get better and can be damaging to your health and career. I highly recommend this article on [The Impact of Narcissism on Leadership and Sustainability](#).

However, if the issue is more around poor interpersonal/management skills then I would suggest the following:

1. Start by thinking about what is in it for them. What are the benefits to them of having a clear agreement with you? Keep this firmly in your mind throughout your discussions.
2. Then think about what your [next best option](#) is to having this agreement with your boss e.g. could you instead make an agreement with your co-workers that 'manages around' the problem? Even if you don't use this option, knowing that you have other options increases your power and ability to be flexible in the conversation.
3. Help them to experience the benefits of these sorts of agreements. Break the agreement down into bite size pieces – your knowledge of your manager will determine how small the pieces need to be! Start with the easiest topic – preferably one that hasn't involved conflict with them. Make sure you show them that you are interested in their needs and ask them questions – *'I just want to get clear about how often you would like me to update you on this project and what sort of information would be useful for you?'*
4. [Motivate](#) them to continue to work with you in this way by giving positive consequences for both:
 - a. Participating in the discussion – Whatever you think would be meaningful to them - *'Thank you for taking the time to clarify this for me – this has been very helpful', and,*

- b. Having and following the agreement – make sure you keep to your side of the agreement and remind them of it – *‘Hello John! As we agreed, if you get delayed and can’t make the start of the team meeting, you would like us to start by discussing ‘correspondence’ so we have covered points 3:1 to 3:4 on the agenda and now we will go back to’*

Once they are comfortable with making these small agreements with you, move onto more challenging topics.

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