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The Hostile, the Unfair, and the Toxic

BAD BOSS INDEX 2025

What would you be willing to trade for a good boss? A fancy, coveted position at Google?

(66% of people say they'd choose a good boss over working for a prestigious company.)

A bigger paycheck?

(49% of employees prefer having a good boss to earning a higher salary.)

The comfort of working from home?

(44% would opt for a good boss over a flexible work setup.)

Top-notch healthcare?

(42% of employees would rather have a good boss than better benefits.)

No matter how good a job is, a boss can still make or break the employee experience. The majority of employees will consider leaving their job if their boss is unempathetic, unfair, or simply frustrating. And with stagnating wages and a lagging job market, neither employees nor employers can afford to be stuck with bad managers.

To learn more about the state of bad bosses in today's workplace, we surveyed over 1,000 US employees. Read on to find out just how common bad bosses are, the worst behaviors employees experience, and how bad bosses could be impacting your organization.

*Quotes have been lightly edited for clarity and concision.

Key Findings

- Supportive, communicative, and empowering managers are highly valued, while favoritism, poor communication, and micromanagement are major issues with bad bosses.

- Women and younger workers report a higher prevalence of bad bosses.

- Top deal-breakers for employees include unethical behavior, hypercriticism, and unrealistic expectations.

- Good or bad, bosses impact the employee experience: 70% of respondents felt their boss had a positive impact on job satisfaction, but 53% said their boss influenced their decision to leave a job.

- When facing issues with managers, most employees prefer direct communication (72%), while 31% would prefer involving HR.

- More than half (59%) of respondents worry about retaliation when providing feedback or reporting issues with their managers.

- Bad bosses seem to outnumber the good, with 70% of respondents saying it was somewhat or very common to encounter bad bosses at work.

How Common Are Bad Bosses?

The "bad boss" is a widespread cultural archetype, but how many people actually have a bad boss? As it turns out, it may be a lot: **70% of employees report that bad bosses are either somewhat or very common.**

The perceived prevalence of bad bosses differs among age groups and genders. **Slightly more women (72%) report the prevalence of bad bosses than men (68%), but generational differences** in bad boss experiences are even wider.

Almost 8 in 10 (**77%) Gen Z employees agree that bad bosses are common, compared to just 62% of Baby Boomer employees**. The sentiments of Millennial and Gen X employees fall somewhere in the middle, at 74% and 72%, respectively.

Who Thinks Bad Bosses Are Common?

72%	Women
68%	Men
77%	Gen Z
74%	Millennials
72%	Gen X
62%	Baby Boomers
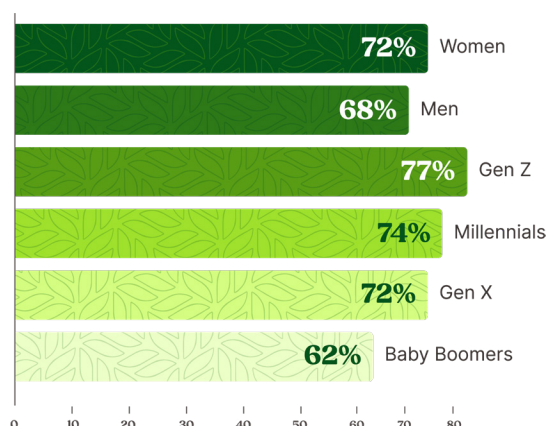
Pet Peeves vs. Dealbreakers: What Are the Worst Bad Boss Behaviors?

Not all bad bosses are equally bad—while employees can tolerate a few annoying habits, certain bad boss behaviors are absolute dealbreakers.

We asked respondents to rate a variety of common bad boss behaviors.

On the more benign end of the spectrum, **top pet peeves** include:

- Disorganized (33%)

- Micromanaging (29%)

- Unapproachable, inflexible (27%)

On the more severe end, **top dealbreakers** include:

- Being unethical (62%)

- Being hypercritical (54%)
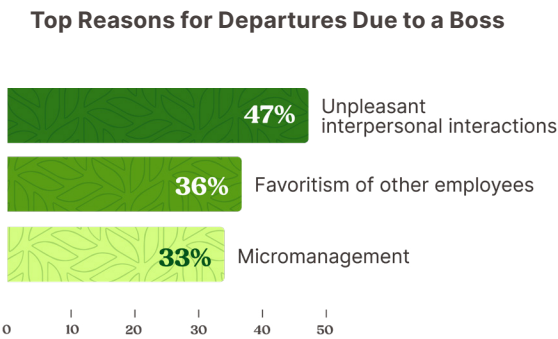
- Overworking the team/unrealistic expectations (54%)

> "They were not communicating with everyone and always showed up late. When we had a deadline, they weren't there—they showed up 20 minutes late."
>
> **FULL-TIME WORKER | NORTH DAKOTA**

Over Half of Employees Say Their Boss Influenced Their Decision to Leave a Previous Job

Bad bosses cause more harm than just workplace frustration. Problems with bad management can lead to plummeting **retention rates**, with **over half of respondents (53%) sharing that their boss played a role in their decision to leave a job**. An additional 22% of employees say that a bad boss has made them think about leaving.

Some of the most common behaviors reported as triggers for leaving a job include interpersonal problems (47%), favoritism (36%), and micromanagement (33%). Notably, despite employees rating **micromanagement** as merely a pet peeve, it's still a common reason to leave a job, suggesting that an employee's patience for even mildly bad behaviors can only last so long.

Top Reasons for Departures Due to a Boss

47%	Unpleasant interpersonal interactions
36%	Favoritism of other employees
33%	Micromanagement

0   10   20   30   40   50

> "Micromanagement feels like harassment, especially when I'm already providing excellent results."
>
> **FULL-TIME WORKER | NEW YORK**

On the flip side, having a good boss appears to be a big factor in employee satisfaction: **70% of employees feel their boss had a significant or somewhat significant positive impact on their overall job satisfaction.**

In short, a boss shapes the employee experience, whether they're boosting satisfaction levels or chasing employees out the door.

Get the Definitive Guide to Employee Retention

The impact of voluntary turnover isn't just about productivity. It's about losing institutional knowledge, skill, and overall business momentum. Get our free guide to learn practical steps for mitigating voluntary turnover, and to see how other companies are faring.
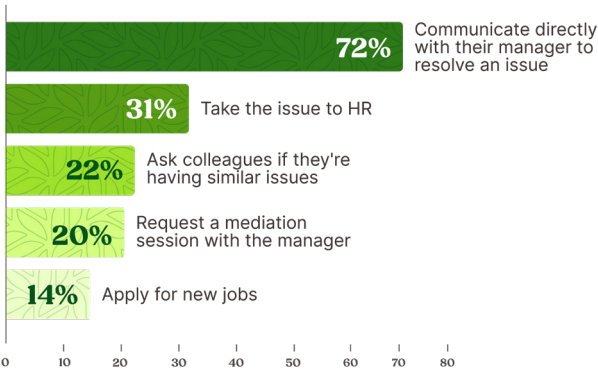
START READING ⟶

More Than Half of Employees Fear Retaliation

How do you approach a bad boss? **Most employees (72%) want to handle the problem themselves and communicate directly with their manager.**

That said, confronting your boss is easier said than done, and many employees say they'd seek support from a third party, such as taking the problem to HR (31%), asking colleagues if they're having similar issues (22%), and requesting **mediation** (20%). A sizable portion of respondents (14%) would simply start applying for new jobs.
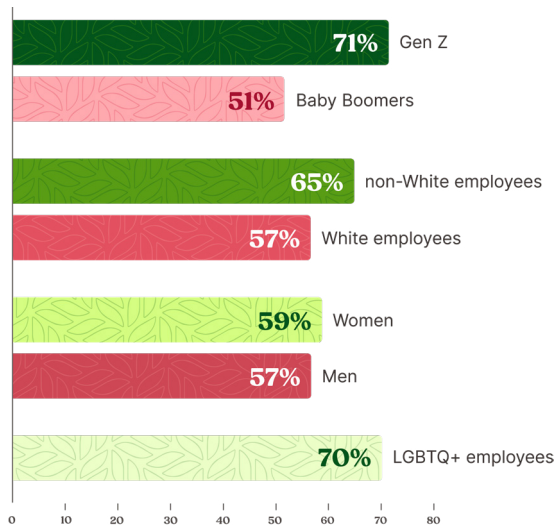
How do employees prefer to resolve issues with managers?

72%	Communicate directly with their manager to resolve an issue
31%	Take the issue to HR
22%	Ask colleagues if they're having similar issues
20%	Request a mediation session with the manager
14%	Apply for new jobs

0   10   20   30   40   50   60   70   80

A possible deterrent from speaking up about a bad boss is **retaliation**. **Over half of employees (59%) fear retaliation when raising a concern about a manager**, and 47% of employees agree that going to HR can lead to retaliation.

Fear of retaliation is fairly high among all demographic groups, but some groups express significantly greater rates of anxiety, particularly young employees, people of color, and LGBTQ+ workers. These disparities in retaliation fears suggest that historically marginalized groups in the workplace may feel **underprotected** by their organization.

Who Fears Managerial Retaliation?

Group	Percent
Gen Z	71%
Baby Boomers	51%
non-White employees	65%
White employees	57%
Women	59%
Men	57%
LGBTQ+ employees	70%

Unfortunately, fears about retaliation aren't unfounded. **More than 3 in 4 employees (77%) report experiencing some type of retaliation for speaking out against a manager.**

> "I had a manager who was very dishonest and hostile. They made false accusations and treated employees unfairly. It lowered morale and productivity."
>
> **FULL-TIME WORKER | MARYLAND**

Respondents identified a wide range of retaliatory actions, from poor performance reviews to physical abuse. The top reported forms of retaliation include receiving an inaccurate performance evaluation (31%), being reprimanded (30%), and experiencing increased scrutiny (28%).

Managerial Retaliation Experienced by Employees

Form of Retaliation	Percent
Receiving an inaccurate performance evaluation that is lower than it should be	31%
Being reprimanded	30%
Experiencing increased scrutiny	28%
Being subjected to more difficult work conditions	25%
Physical or verbal abuse	21%
Being a victim of false rumors spread by the manager	18%
Being transferred to a less desirable position	18%
Being threatened or reported to police or immigration officials	6%

WHEN IS RETALIATION ILLEGAL?

The **Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)** defines retaliation as any treatment that is "materially adverse" enough to deter employees from taking legally protected action (e.g., making a harassment complaint). Based on EEOC standards, all of the forms of retaliation experienced by respondents are potentially illegal.

If you aren't sure if a **retaliatory behavior** is illegal, be sure to check state law, as well. Each state has its own anti-retaliation statutes, and they may provide additional protection to employees.

How to Identify—and Correct—Bad Boss Behaviors in the Workplace

So what's HR to do? **Problematic bosses** often need additional coaching, and, depending on the severity of their behavior, a formal reprimand or disciplinary action. If a manager has created an irreparably unsafe environment or is a repeat offender, it may be time to **part ways.**

But bad bosses can also be a sign of a **culture issue**, and that requires change across the organization. Here's a breakdown

of the bad behaviors most commonly cited by respondents and ways HR can intervene on a team with a bad boss culture.

FAVORITISM & UNFAIR TREATMENT

Favoritism is one of the top reasons employees leave a job due to a boss. When bosses treat employees unequally, based on personal bias instead of performance, it breeds frustration, resentment, and **low morale**.

RED FLAGS TO WATCH OUT FOR:

- **Preferential shift assignments**: Shift scheduling decisions don't appear to defer to merit, seniority, or operational efficiency.

- **Unfair performance reviews**: The manager gives performance reviews inconsistent with actual employee performance (e.g., one sales employee receives great performance reviews despite never meeting sales goals, whereas another employee regularly exceeds goals but receives middling reviews).

- **Unjustified perks**: The manager awards perks to certain employees (such as longer breaks) that are seemingly unrelated to employee merit or organization-wide engagement initiatives.

HOW HR CAN INTERVENE:

- Develop and apply standardized definitions for **performance** expectations and ratings.

- Revise any unfair performance reviews to accurately reflect KPI outcomes and **feedback** from credible peers and supervisors.

- Re-engage impacted employees with meaningful **career development opportunities.**

Free Template: Performance Competency Scorecard

Ditch the guesswork and start consistently tracking core competencies and skills over time. Identify strengths, set goals, differentiate employee progress, and help your people take their careers to the next level.

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POOR COMMUNICATION AND LACK OF TRANSPARENCY

When a boss doesn't keep their team in the loop and won't take any feedback, employees are left to flounder. Poor manager communication leaves employees overwhelmed by their workload and can lead to the perception that the boss is more interested in their own agenda than in their employees' needs.

> "He wasn't willing to sit down and talk, and wasn't interested in my input about the job. He wanted me to ignore safety rules so production would go higher."
>
> **PART-TIME WORKER | GEORGIA**

RED FLAGS TO WATCH OUT FOR:

- **Not open to feedback**: The manager consistently ignores or dismisses employee input and feedback.

- **Vague expectations**: Employees complain of receiving tasks without clear instructions, goals, or support.

- **Information hoarding**: A rise in employee performance issues that indicate limited access to important information they need to do their jobs effectively (e.g., in-store retail employees unaware of new corporate policies).

HOW HR CAN INTERVENE:

- Use regular feedback channels, such as a**nonymous surveys**, to gauge employee wellbeing and get direct input from individual contributors.

- Implement mandatory **manager training** on active listening and leadership transparency.

- Facilitate team-building workshops to improve **communication skills**.

UNPROFESSIONAL AND UNETHICAL BEHAVIOR

Unprofessional and unethical actions are some of the most toxic bad boss behaviors. Poor interpersonal treatment is the leading reason for manager-related job departures—nobody wants to put up with cruel behavior in the workplace. Unethical boss behavior can also lead to serious legal issues, especially when the bad boss retaliates against complaining employees.

> "They cussed out everyone and stole from our paychecks. Very unethical."
>
> **FULL-TIME WORKER | TENNESSEE**

> "They tried to hit on me. I was married and uninterested."
>
> **FULL-TIME WORKER | PENNSYLVANIA**

Fix Broken Company Culture: Free Bundle

Your company culture isn't just a nice-to-have—it's an essential part of any thriving business. To help you boost your company culture, we've packaged up BambooHR's best resources on fixing broken company cultures and creating great places to work.

DOWNLOAD NOW →

RED FLAGS TO WATCH OUT FOR:

- **Harassment or bullying complaints**: Employees are making formal or informal complaints about being harassed by the manager.

- **Informational discrepancies**: The manager has an emerging pattern of discrepancies in financial reports or other important recordkeeping responsibilities.

- **Confidentiality breaches**: The manager has a tendency to disclose sensitive information about either their employees or the business without proper consent.

- **Poor employee wellness**: Employee feedback surveys show dropping levels of emotional wellbeing within a particular team or department.

HOW HR CAN INTERVENE:

- Enforce a strict policy around **employee conduct**.

- Inform employees of their rights and offer a clear, **confidential** process for making complaints.

- Thoroughly **investigate** any complaint made about employee misconduct, including **off-duty misconduct**.

- Require mandatory training on ethics, harassment, and **compliance**.

MICROMANAGEMENT AND LACK OF AUTONOMY

Although most employees consider it just a pet peeve, **micromanagement** is a silent killer for retention rates, with 1 in 3 employees willing to leave a job to get away from a **micromanaging** boss.

> "Every time I would do something, I'd be watched and critiqued."
>
> **FULL-TIME WORKER | SOUTH CAROLINA**

> "The worst experience is having my schedule changed by my manager and not having any input in the decision, and then being yelled at for this. They did not respect employees' opinions and made decisions without consulting the employees or notifying them."
>
> **FULL-TIME WORKER | ARIZONA**

RED FLAGS TO WATCH OUT FOR:

- **Reluctance to delegate**: The manager takes on an unreasonably large workload and rarely delegates tasks to team members.

- **Unilateral decision-making**: The manager never seems to consult with team members before making decisions, even when the decision is directly related to another employee's expertise or day-to-day responsibilities.

- **Low employee motivation**: **Engagement and productivity** levels within the team appear to be waning, and employees seem disinterested in career growth or new projects.

- **Learned helplessness (i.e., weaponized incompetence)**: Employees exhibit an overreliance on close supervision and step-by-step instructions, and have made little to no progress in gaining the skills needed for a promotion.

HOW HR CAN INTERVENE:

- Implement **performance management strategies** that emphasize outcomes over rigid processes.

- Create clearer guidelines for autonomy levels and decision-making responsibilities for each role.

- Lead workshops on collaborative problem solving.

Free Download: Performance Review Checklist

Want to uplevel your performance reviews and empower your team? This handy checklist will help you evaluate your current performance review process, so managers and employees can grow and thrive.

GET THE CHECKLIST →

LACK OF SUPPORT AND APPRECIATION

Everyone wants to hear "thank you" once in a while. Beyond that, employees want their managers to support their **career development** and provide **constructive feedback** on their work. Without a supportive and appreciative boss, **employee morale** bottoms out.

RED FLAGS TO WATCH OUT FOR:

- **No endorsements**: The manager rarely recommends team members for awards or promotions, ignoring high-achieving contributors.

- **Low sense of value**: On feedback surveys, employees report not feeling valued by either their boss or the organization.

- **Neglect of employee needs**: The manager fails to provide the resources or assistance necessary for employees to succeed.

HOW HR CAN INTERVENE:

- Create a **recognition** and rewards program to encourage both individual contributors and managers to **celebrate employee achievements.**

- Require managers to hold regular one-on-one **meetings with direct reports** to discuss current work projects, performance, and long-term career goals.

- Establish a consistent job leveling system as a clearer guide for promotion paths.

5 Habits of Highly Effective Bosses

It's not all bad out there: **68% of employees also say that good bosses are common**, and many respondents shared positive experiences with their supervisors. Here are some of the top good boss behaviors that respondents highlighted.

SUPPORTIVE AND UNDERSTANDING

An effective boss genuinely cares about their **employees' wellbeing**. Employees highly value bosses who understand the human side of a worker's life and offer flexibility to deal with emergencies and personal matters. By listening empathetically and without judgment, people leaders can build trust and openness within their teams, enhancing innovation and collaboration.

> "They understood that things happen and they let you make up time without using personal/sick/vacation time. They won't count it against you. It made me want to be there and work even harder."
>
> **FULL-TIME WORKER | PENNSYLVANIA**

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION AND FEEDBACK

Good managers maintain an **open line of communication** with direct reports, giving helpful feedback and paying attention to employee strengths and needs. Employees praise bosses who give **constructive feedback**, expressing an increased motivation to improve and a greater sense of trust in their boss's support.

> "They knew how to read people, focusing on their strengths. They were a good communicator and problem solver."
>
> **PART-TIME WORKER | NEVADA**

> "They provide concrete examples and insights that help the employee understand how they can improve or continue excelling in their role."
>
> **PART-TIME WORKER | SOUTH CAROLINA**

EMPOWERMENT AND TRUST

In contrast to the broad dislike for micromanagement, employees greatly appreciate bosses who **empower them** with independence and trust them to do the job well. Giving employees more freedom enhances **job satisfaction**, with employees embracing creative opportunities and feeling more motivated to take initiative on projects.

> "I was able to do my job because the manager trusted me. I was able to decide how to do my job and change the way it was done if needed."
>
> **FULL-TIME WORKER | OHIO**

RECOGNITION AND REWARDS

A good boss doesn't just support you in your daily tasks, they champion you in the long-run. Employees love a boss that guides them through promotion processes, boasts about their achievements, and supports them in their **long-term career goals.**

When bosses support employee career growth, not only are they making employees feel valued (which boosts retention and satisfaction), but they're also helping the company invest more deeply in its talent.

> "My manager advocated for me to get a raise. They wrote a recommendation to the company president, outlining my accomplishments."
>
> **FULL-TIME WORKER | CALIFORNIA**

> "They have confidence in me to do my job correctly. She gave me a great reference."
>
> **PART-TIME WORKER | MASSACHUSETTS**

POSITIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT

Most importantly, managers set the tone for the entire team. By providing transparent communication, showing interest in employee wellbeing, and encouraging employees to reach their goals, good bosses create a **positive, safe workplace** where employees are excited to show up and give their best every day.

Included. Supported. Retained.

Don't leave your company culture to chance. With accurate, reliable employee surveys in BambooHR, you'll gain the insight you need to prevent burnout, improve morale, and stop premature turnover in its tracks

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METHODOLOGY

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All source data was collected in February 2025, and includes a representative sample of over 1,000 US workers, controlling for age, gender, region, and race.