

When you don't trust your boss

Story Highlights

- Having trust in coworkers and boss is important to your career
- If in doubt about boss, determine if it's your own bias or fact-based
- Reporting a criminal boss doesn't always go smoothly, author warns
- If boss can easily damage your career, you need to take your career elsewhere

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If reporting a boss for unethical behavior, have first-hand facts and remove emotions from story, expert says.

Workplaces are all about trust. It's one of those buzzwords you can't escape, along with "synergy," "teamwork" and "value add." There are even teambuilding activities based on trust.

The problem with trust is that it's a loaded concept. How do you know when you trust someone? Are there levels of it or is it a black and white issue? Can you really establish trust by falling backwards and hoping Rick from accounting will, in fact, catch you?

That's for you to decide, but what isn't up for much debate is the importance of trust. Whether you work in a huge corporation or on a small team with three people, trust plays a role in your job. You want to know that no one's stealing your ideas, they're keeping their promises and you can rely on everyone else to do their jobs.

If you find that you can't trust a co-worker, you can discuss the issue face-to-face, and if need be, go to the boss to resolve the issue. But what if it's the boss that's the problem?

As with any situation, you need to step back and identify the problem, says Holly Green, CEO and managing director of The Human Factor, a consulting firm.

"First and foremost, determine why you don't trust your boss," Green recommends. "Is it based on your own assumptions, beliefs and biases, which you have sought to prove true over time or is there some truly tangible data? Are you absolutely sure you are right? If so, you have to then decide whether it is a personal issue -- i.e. it is against or outside your own ethics and standards versus it is illegal, clearly against company policy, etc."

If the boss is operating outside of your personal standards but well within the company's policies and principles, Green cautions employees to think about their limits.

"You have to make a decision on whether you can live with it," she says. "Are you going to build up resentment over time that is going to leak out of you and damage your own reputation? What tradeoffs are you willing to make?"

For example, a previous boss told Green she was doing too much high quality work and as a result she was damaging the rest of the team's images. She knew she couldn't operate in that kind of environment, but the boss wasn't violating any company procedures, either. So she chose to leave.

When it's not a personal issue

Other times, trust isn't subjective. For instance, if your boss is stealing from the company, there's not much of a gray area. If a boss can steal, he or she probably won't have many qualms about crossing into other unethical areas.

Green encourages reporting a boss who is undeniably stealing or violating a policy or law.

"Often companies have an ethics hotline you can call or you can go to HR," she says. "Make sure you have details, including first-hand facts about your claim. Work hard to remove emotions from the story. Speak using first-hand data -- what you saw, experienced [and] heard."

Reporting a criminal boss doesn't always go as smoothly as you hope, warns Elisabeth Pollaert Smith, photographer and author.

"It depends on how good your HR department is. Some of them have knee-jerk reactions to side with the senior person," she says. In that case, they can go to your boss and tell them what you've said. However, that shouldn't preclude you from reporting him or her because you don't want to get in trouble for being silent while you knew what was going on.

"Document as much as you can, then find the person you trust the most to report it to -- be it your boss's boss, HR or legal," Smith advises. "Then be prepared that this may come back and bite you in the butt, big time, but that's life."

The benefit of a paper trail

Documenting interaction with a boss isn't only necessary if you think he or she is explicitly breaking a law or policy. Documentation can help you with any unscrupulous boss -- say one who steals your ideas.

"You're going to have to realize that you can't stop all of it," Smith says. "But you can stop some of it, by telling them ideas at the same time you copy someone else, or telling someone else first and then saying to your boss, 'Hey, I was talking to Joe about this and he thought you might be interested in hearing it.' That way they'll know they risk being caught and embarrassed if they try to steal those ideas."

And if things are more personal, such as not keeping your confidential conversations private, you need to think before you speak. It might sound counterintuitive to put the onus on you, but it's true. If the boss spreads information that is legally supposed to be confidential, that's one thing. But if you offer up fodder for gossip and hear it repeated, then you need to be careful what you say to him or her. Smith advises discretion for all employees, not just for those dealing with a sketchy boss.

When it comes to issues of trust, you need to focus on your well being. It might sound as if you're going against the concept of teamwork and cooperation, but it's not. At the end of the day, if the boss can easily damage your career, you need to take your career elsewhere.

"If you've seen them betray a colleague, just beware, and start looking for a way to get out, be it a lateral move or a new job," Smith suggests. "[If] and when push comes to shove, your boss will most likely shove you -- under a bus (figuratively, hopefully)."