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BAD TO THE BONE?

HONEST DIALOGUE MIGHT HELP

EMPLOYEES DEAL WITH DIFFICULT BOSSES

By Debbie Miller

THE MORNING NEWS • DMILLER@NWAONLINE.NET

The movie title calls the ruthless, abusive and condescending bully of a boss the "devil."

But Laura Cleaveland's not so sure about the moniker.

"Since they call her the devil, I thought she'd be evil," Cleaveland said after emerging from a Fayetteville theater showing "The Devil Wears Prada." Sure, Miranda Priestly (Meryl Streep) is rude and treats all employees with contempt, but she's not really that evil, the college student said.

Cleaveland enjoyed the flick but struggled a little to decide whether the movie about a junior assistant at a fashion magazine had anything to say about boss-employee relations.

True, bosses sometimes can expect impossible things, she mused, and, as can happen in the workplace, "She (protagonist Andrea Sachs) never got credit for what she

did do."

But that was about as far as the analogies went for Cleaveland. She left Fayetteville the next day to return to the University of Georgia.

Her friend, Ann Barton of Fayetteville, saw the movie's biggest workplace truth when Miranda is about to enter the office and people are trying frantically to prepare themselves. "Gird your loins," cries one employee.

Recalling the scene made Barton chuckle.

"I liked how they all scattered," she said. "I had a job where we would do that."

Neither Barton nor Cleaveland recalled having a Miranda Priestly type for a boss nor did they mention any other notorious movie bosses, like Katharine

Parker (Sigourney Weaver) of "Working Girl" (1988) or Franklin Hart (Dabney Coleman) of "9 to 5" (1980).

'My Bad Boss' Tales

Still, bad bosses are out there.

An organization called Working America, a community affiliate of the AFL-CIO, sponsored a "My Bad Boss Contest" on the Internet.

More than 4,500 stories were submitted. The winner, selected by Internet votes, told the story of a boss who, in response to patients' cancellations on Sept. 11, 2001, took \$100 out of each employee's paycheck to offset the losses in anticipated revenue.

Karen Nussbaum, Working America's executive director, worked with a similar contest for another organization two decades ago.

Tales of supervisor abuses

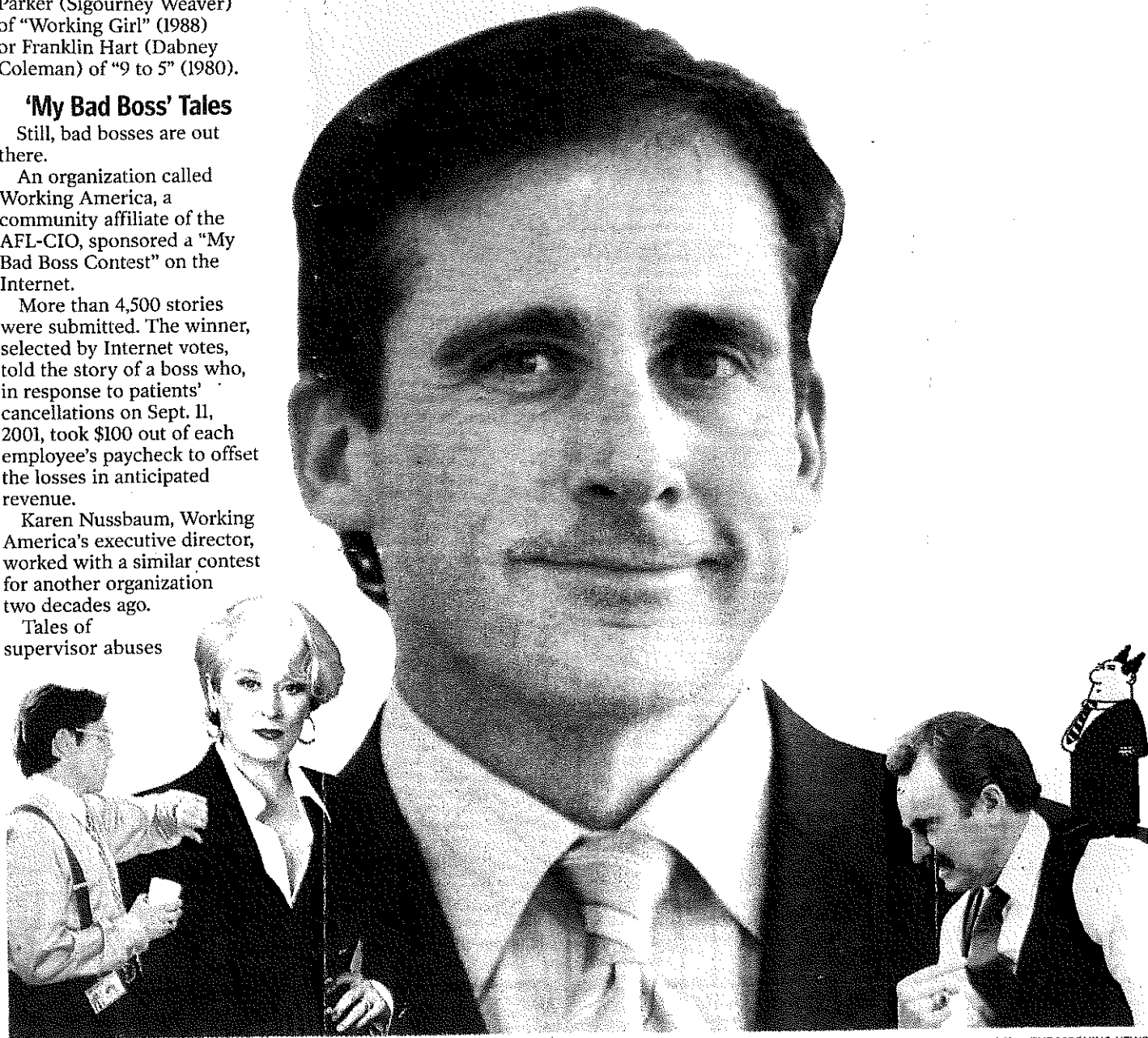


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Popular culture has created many bad bosses including Bill Lumbergh (Gary Cole) from "Office Space," from left, Miranda Priestly (Meryl Streep) from "The Devil Wears Prada," Michael Scott (Steve Carrel) from "The Office," Franklin Hart (Dabney Coleman) from "9 to 5" and The Boss from "Dilbert."

in that contest seemed less cruel, she said in a phone interview. One boss required an employee to clean his dentures, she recalled.

This year's tales were more often about bosses refusing to allow people to be off to spend time with a dying family member.

Entries displayed a heartlessness rather than a cluelessness.

"It's a meaner workplace," she concluded.

The contest has ended, but individuals still are invited to view some of the essays, she noted. The Web site is www.workingamerica.org/badboss.

FUN FACTS

SILVER SCREEN WORKPLACE QUIZ

Test your knowledge of bad bosses in books and movies.

- In the book "The Devil Wears Prada," which of these is not likely to be accepted as a reason to miss work?
 - Death (immediate family only)
 - Dismemberment (your own)
 - Nuclear war (only if confirmed by the U.S. government to be directly affecting Manhattan)
 - Mononucleosis
- In "Working Girl," this person said of the potential for a marriage proposal from Harrison Ford's character — "We're in the same city now. I've indicated that I'm receptive to an offer. I've cleared the month of June ... and I am, after all, me."
 - Cyn (Joan Cusack)
 - Katharine Parker (Sigourney Weaver)
 - Tess McGill (Melanie Griffith)
 - Personnel director (Olympia Dukakis)
- Which character in "9 to 5" dreamed about giving the boss a taste of his own medicine, then hog-tying him and roasting him over a fire?
 - Doralee Rhodes (Dolly Parton)
 - Violet Newstead (Lily Tomlin)
 - Judy Bernly (Jane Fonda)
 - Roz Keith (Elizabeth Wilson)
- What happened to the "sexist, egotistical, lying, hypocritical bigot" in "9 to 5"?
 - He's sent to Brazil and abducted by Amazons.
 - He goes to jail for defrauding the company.
 - He becomes a backup singer for Doralee Rhodes.
 - He goes to Aspen to study Portuguese.
- Which phrase would be out of character for bad boss Miranda Priestly?
 - "Bore someone else with your questions."
 - "Find me that piece of paper I had in my hand yesterday morning."
 - "Thank you."
 - "The details of your incompetence do not interest me."
- Which movie about workplaces has the term "TPS reports" and a ludicrous conversation ending with "if ... that'd be great" all because an employee forgot to use the new cover sheet?
 - "9 to 5"
 - "Working Girl"
 - "The Devil Wears Prada"
 - "Office Space"
- When "Devil's" Andy talks to Nigel about whether anyone eats around Runway, he responds, "Not since 2 is the new 4, and 0 is the new 2." Andy says she's a size 6, and he responds:
 - "Aha, the new 14."
 - "No more carbs for you."
 - "How did you get in the door?"
 - "Don't make me feed you to one of the models."
- What is the impossible assignment Andy accomplishes in "The Devil Wears Prada" movie?
 - Convincing the military to helicopter Miranda and her husband out of Florida during a hurricane
 - Getting two copies of the unpublished manuscript of the next Harry Potter book for the twins
 - Getting 15 skirts from Calvin Klein without any direction on what kind of skirts
 - Allows herself to be the subject of a "before-and-after" feature in the magazine

Answers:

1. D 2. B 3. A 4. A 5. C 6. D 7. A 8. B

More Than Surviving

Gini Graham Scott has written more than 40 books, including "A Survival Guide for Working with Bad Bosses" (AMACON, a division of the American Management Association, 2005, \$15).

The publication includes real-world work situations and advice about how to work with folks like "The Great Betrayer," "The Know-Nothing Boss" and "The Bad Communicator."

Scott cautioned there's not a "one solution fits all" strategy, but some steps can help the employee survive — or maybe even thrive.

"Much depends on the boss," the author said in a recent phone interview. In "Prada," there wasn't going to be a way for Andy, the junior assistant, to talk to Miranda and discuss workplace issues.

A better strategy for her would have been developing a support group of trusted employees or of friends and family. The movie's protagonist missed any opportunities in the workplace and sabotaged her outside support network by alienating friends and family, she noted.

Still, not all boss/employee relationships have to be about a Mirandaeque supervisor barking orders to a junior assistant or belittling workers in front of peers.

Scott recommends having a conversation with a boss if it's realistic to do so. The key focus for the talk should be about how the employee can do a better job or work more effectively.

Not all bosses are terrible managers, beyond all hope of improvement. Sometimes, Scott noted, a person is really good at doing a task and is rewarded with a promotion to management.

Such supervisors might not come up through a management training program. Yet,

"It's a whole different set of skills for managing people than it is for doing the job," she said.

An employee sometimes can offer help in a tactful way, but such situations require knowledge of the boss and of the office politics.

A tale in her book speaks of a man put in charge of promotions at the family's television station.

He organizes a contest in which people bring a pumpkin anytime they see a news van or truck gathering news in their neighborhood. The scheme interferes with the ability to gather news, but workers are afraid to talk to the supervisor. Yet, the best thing to do, Scott said, would be to explain gently that the plan creates an obstacle to the task of newsgathering and suggest an alternative like a drop-off point in the community.

Not all supervisors welcome such conversation.

In the movie, Miranda Priestly is domineering, overbearing and unwilling to listen to feedback. It's better in such an instance not even to ask for clarification of an instruction, but just to do the best one can, Scott said.

The circumstances mentioned in Scott's book on working with bad bosses are based on true accounts altered to protect identities, she said.

Collecting anecdotes about bad bosses or supervisors who could improve wasn't difficult for the California author and consultant.

She interviewed people for most of them and threw in a few stories based on her own experiences. She still received some tales about supervisor woes after she had finished writing the book.

"It's really a very universal kind of thing," she said.

AT A GLANCE

FIVE WORST OFFENSES BY BAD BOSSES

Beverly Kaye and Sharon Jordan-Evans, authors of "Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay" (third edition, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2002), have said the most frequently cited reason for quitting a job is a bad boss.

A 2005 online survey based on their books looked at behaviors that make employees leave.

The top five offenses were:

- ▶ Belittles people in front of others.
- ▶ Lies.
- ▶ Condescends or demeans.
- ▶ Humiliates and embarrasses others.
- ▶ Micromanages.

MAKING BOSSES BETTER

Kaye and Jordan-Evans said there are solutions for employers of bad bosses that don't require firing the supervisors. Bad bosses can change, they said.

Their suggestions for bosses seeking to improve:

- ▶ Get honest feedback from others.
- ▶ Make sure you see the reasons for change.
- ▶ Commit to change, and begin by working on one important behavior.
- ▶ Seek out coaches, counselors and improvement workshops.
- ▶ Ask others to monitor your progress and give you feedback.

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