Toxic Bosses Survey
What They Do & How We Cope

October 2023 • The Harris Poll Thought Leadership Practice
Methodology

This survey was conducted online within the U.S. by The Harris Poll from September 1st to 3rd, 2023, among a nationally representative sample of 1,233 employed U.S. adults.

This research comprises 134 Gen Z (ages 18-25), 512 Millennials (ages 26-41), 393 Gen X (ages 42-57), and 194 Boomers (ages 58 and older).

A “toxic boss” refers to a boss or supervisor who has exhibited any toxic behaviors (e.g., micromanagement, credit-stealing, unreasonable expectations, unprofessional behavior, being unapproachable, etc.)
Top Highlights

- Many American employers display harmful behaviors such as setting unreasonable expectations (51%), micromanaging (49%), and credit-stealing (48%). A staggering 53% of American employees confess to working on weekends, holidays, or days off because of their bosses. The issue is pervasive, with over two-thirds of American workers having experienced a toxic boss, and 31% currently working under one.

- Americans endure toxic work environments primarily due to financial reasons (72%) and convenience factors like proximity to home and fixed work schedules (72%). The uncertain economic climate (73%) also forces many to endure toxic bosses, taking a toll on their productivity, performance, and personal lives. More than half of those with toxic bosses admit to having nightmares about them (53%).

- The anxiety stemming from toxic bosses is extensive, with 73% experiencing weekend anxiety about returning to work on Mondays. Additionally, 41% have sought therapy to cope with the toxicity of their current or past bosses. Toxic bosses often use phrases like "What I say is final because I am the boss" and "You're lucky to have a job in today's economy" to exert control.

- A significant number of employees (66%) with toxic bosses plan to quit as soon as the economy allows, a sentiment shared by half of all Millennials. Surprisingly, despite the severe consequences, toxic bosses are not only tolerated but also promoted, with 60% of American workers witnessing their ascent in leadership roles despite their toxicity.

- To unlock the best potential of American workers, it is essential for bosses to foster a positive work environment, respecting and nurturing their employees. This approach could significantly enhance productivity (85%) and prepare employees for greater responsibilities (81%).
Toxic Bosses: What They Do & How We Cope
From setting unreasonable expectations, micromanaging, and credit-stealing, many American bosses exhibit toxic behaviors

Most prevalent toxic boss behaviors:

- Sets unreasonable expectations: 51%
- Gets too involved in the details of my job when it isn't necessary: 49%
- Gives unfair preferential treatment to certain team members: 49%
- Gives an impression of being unapproachable: 49%
- Does not give credit to team members when appropriate: 48%
- Takes credit for the ideas of others: 45%
- Engages in unprofessional behavior (e.g., inappropriate language): 45%
- Assigns blame to others to protect themselves: 43%
- Discriminates against employees for specific characteristics: 33%

53% American Workers

"I have worked during the weekend, on a holiday, or on my day off because of my boss."

74% Have a toxic boss
64% Black
62% Millennial
The problem is far-reaching: Over two-thirds have had a toxic boss at some point, with nearly 1-in-3 working with a toxic manager today.

Nearly one-third of American workers currently have a boss who has exhibited toxic behavior.

71% of American Workers have had at least one toxic boss during their career.

80% LGBTQIA+

Toxic Bosses: What They Do & How We Cope
Americans endure toxic bosses for two primary reasons: salary and convenience, with three-quarters pointing to the uncertain economy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Salary</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convenience (e.g., close to home, set work schedule, etc.)</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits (e.g., healthcare, 401(k), etc.)</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too hard to find another job</td>
<td>65%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Love for the company or industry</td>
<td>57%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Upcoming bonus or a raise</td>
<td>53%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Remote work</td>
<td>42%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

73% American Workers with a Toxic Boss

“The uncertain economic environment forces me to put up with my bad boss.”
And this endurance has a hefty price, affecting not only workers’ productivity and performance, but reaching into their personal lives outside of the office.

The most common response to having a toxic boss is job hunting, followed by decreased work effort:

- Actively job hunting: 39%
- Intentionally decreasing work effort: 38%
- Taking out frustrations on relationships outside of work: 37%
- Decreased work performance: 36%
- Negative coping mechanisms (drinking, overeating, etc.): 34%
- Intentionally decreasing time spent at work: 34%
- Taking out frustrations on other team members: 30%
- Speaking with the HR department: 25%
- Taking out frustrations on clients/customers: 23%

53% American Workers with a Toxic Boss

“I've had nightmares about my toxic boss.”

32% All American Workers
This leads to considerably more anxiety for those with toxic bosses compared to average American workers – even increasing stress over the economy.

74% American Workers with a Toxic Boss

“I get bad weekend anxiety thinking about coming back to work on Mondays.”

45% All American Workers

71% American Workers with a Toxic Boss

“The current economic environment creates a lot of stress in my company.”

52% All American Workers

41% American Workers with a Toxic Boss

“I've attended therapy to discuss the toxicity of my current or previous boss.”

29% All American Workers
Many workers are familiar with demeaning or demoralizing phrases

Have you heard any of the following phrases or sentiments before from a boss?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phrase</th>
<th>Currently has a toxic boss</th>
<th>All American Workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;What I say is final because I am the boss&quot;</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;You're lucky to have a job in today's economy&quot;</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Listen, I had to work these crazy hours when I was your age&quot;</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Don't ask me, and use your common sense&quot;</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;We did say you'd get a raise, but now that is not possible&quot;</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;You have to get this done, or you will be fired&quot;</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Figure it out, or you won't be working here&quot;</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;What's your name again?&quot; (Or using a wrong name)</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Your idea is stupid&quot;</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;You can't do that, you're a... [marginalized identity, etc.]&quot;</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Let's get drunk&quot;</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Get me a coffee or lunch&quot;</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TOXIC BOSSES: WHAT THEY DO & HOW WE COPE

Have you heard any of the following phrases or sentiments before from a boss? (n=1,233 total)
Two-thirds of those with a toxic boss are planning on quitting due to their boss as soon as the economy allows – and so are half of all Millennials.

69% American Workers with a Toxic Boss

“The minute that the job market improves, I plan on switching my job due to my boss.”

- 51% Millennial
- 47% Remote
- 41% All American Workers

53% American Workers

“I have switched my job before because of a toxic boss.”

- 68% Have a toxic boss
- 61% Remote
- 59% Millennial
Despite these serious repercussions, toxic bosses are often not only tolerated, but rewarded in professional settings.

― Despite being toxic, I have seen toxic bosses rise in the leadership ranks.‖

58% American Workers

― My company should have better ways of dealing with toxic bosses.‖

81% Have a toxic boss
A quarter of Americans want to pull a “Devil Wears Prada” on their toxic boss, while 23% fantasize about smashing some computers like in the “Office Space”

What is your favorite toxic boss fantasy revenge story (i.e., what do you secretly wish you could do)?

- "Devil Wears Prada" (i.e., realizing they aren't worth it, quitting to pursue own passion) - 25%
- "Office Space" (i.e., quitting and smashing the computers) - 23%
- "The Office" (i.e., make jokes about the boss behind their back) - 19%
- "Emily in Paris" (i.e., showing your boss you are very valuable, even if they don't see your worth) - 19%

72% American Workers with a Toxic Boss

“If I saw my boss outside of work, I would actively avoid them (i.e., cross the street, leave the restaurant, etc.)”

45% All American Workers
To unleash American Workers' best, bosses must respect and nurture a positive work environment – which drives higher productivity and readiness for greater responsibilities.

Which of the following actions or attitudes would apply to you as a result of having a boss who respects you and creates a positive work environment?

- **Being more productive**: 85%
- **Giving extra effort to my work**: 83%
- **Willing to take on more responsibilities**: 81%
- **Engaging more with my team**: 80%
- **Staying in my position longer than anticipated**: 80%
- **Recommending the employer to others**: 80%
- **Feeling more creative**: 79%
- **Taking more risks**: 65%

TOX09 Which of the following actions or attitudes would apply to you as a result of having a boss who respects you and creates a positive work environment? (n=1,233 total)
Appendix
American employees are most likely to say that their bosses do a poor job providing them growth opportunities and accepting feedback from others.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How would you rate the performance of your current boss (i.e., supervisor) when it comes to the following?</th>
<th>Bottom 2 = Very/Somewhat Poor Job</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Providing me with growth opportunities</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting feedback from others</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognizing my hard work</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicating with me (e.g., responsiveness, tone, etc.)</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being emotionally intelligent (e.g., empathy, caring about your priorities, etc.)</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing feedback</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treating all employees equitably</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing flexibility when needed (e.g., emergency time off, ways to ease workload, etc.)</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TOXIC BOSSES: WHAT THEY DO & HOW WE COPE

TOX02 How would you rate the performance of your current boss (i.e., supervisor) when it comes to the following? (Bottom 2=Very/Somewhat Poor Job; n=1,233 total)
Four in 10 American Workers have blocked an old toxic boss from following them on social media

41%
American Workers

“I've blocked previous toxic bosses from following me on social media.”

62% Have a toxic boss
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