

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:



53%
American Workers

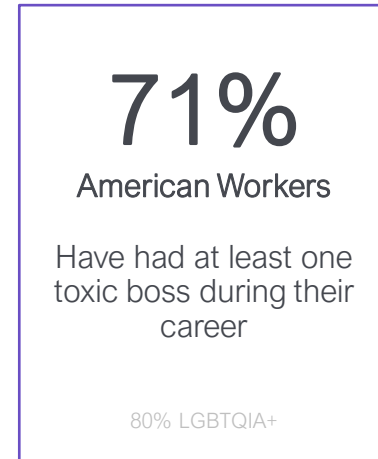
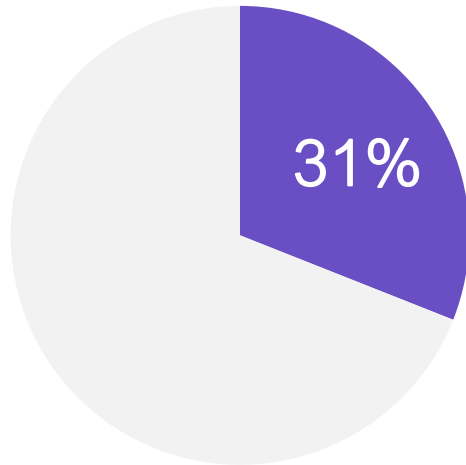
“I have worked during the weekend, on a holiday, or on my day off because of my boss.”

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

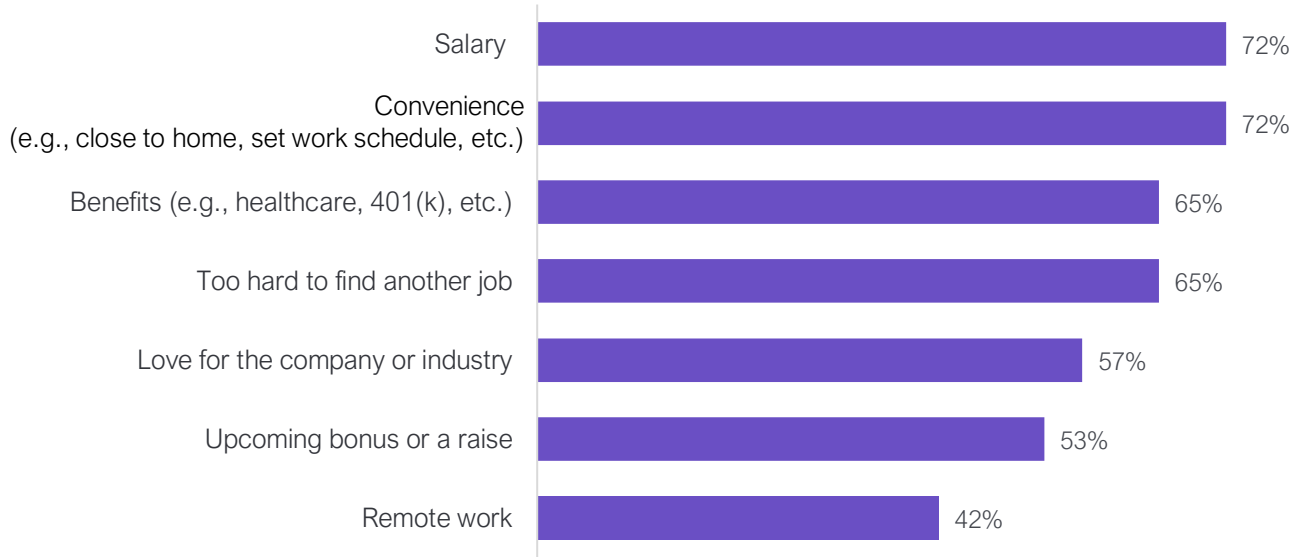
Nearly one-third of American workers currently have a boss who has exhibited toxic behavior





Americans endure toxic bosses for two primary reasons: salary and convenience, with three-quarters pointing to the uncertain economy

Which of the following reasons make you inclined to stay with a boss who is exhibiting toxic traits or engaging in toxic behavior?



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:

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

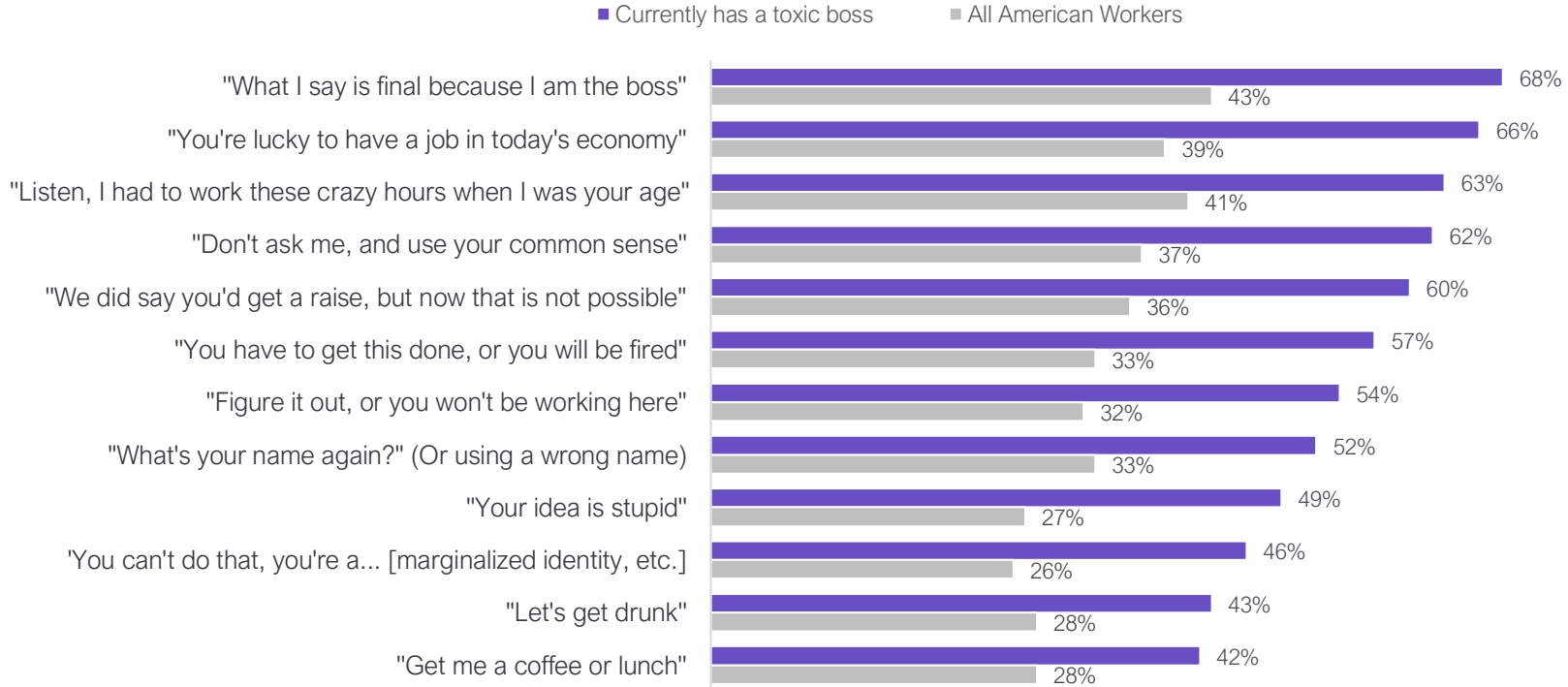
“I've attended **therapy** to discuss the toxicity of my current or previous boss.”

29% All American Workers



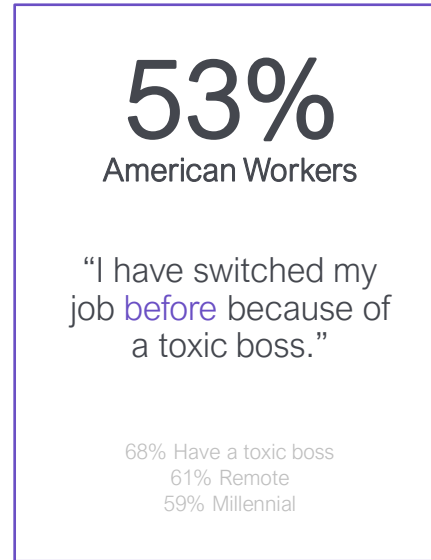
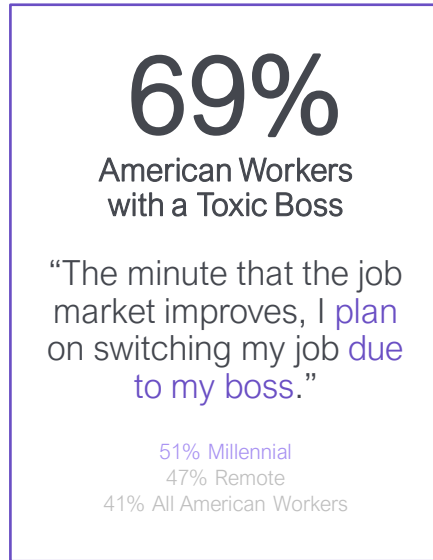
Many workers are familiar with demeaning or demoralizing phrases

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





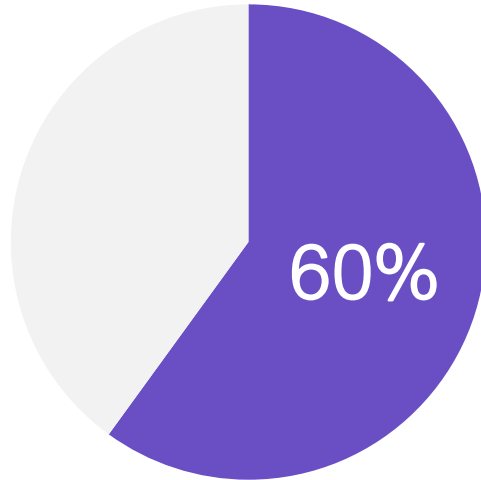
Two-thirds of those with a toxic boss are planning on quitting due to their boss as soon as the economy allows – and so are half of all Millennials





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

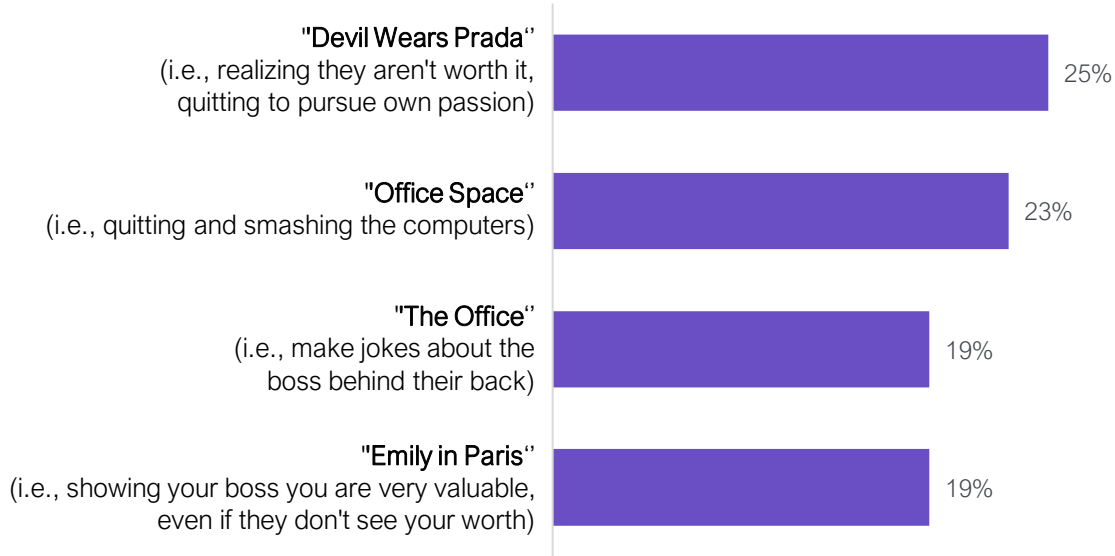
“My company should have **better ways** of dealing with toxic bosses.”

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)?



72%

American Workers with a Toxic Boss

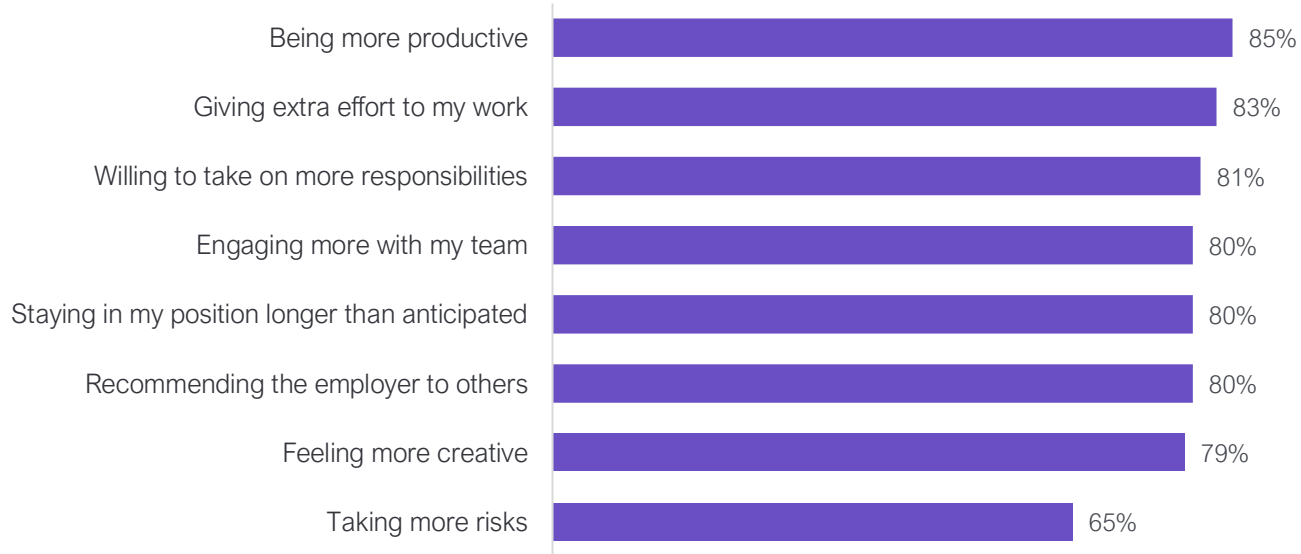
“If I saw my boss outside of work, I would **actively avoid them** (i.e., cross the street, leave the restaurant, etc.)”

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?



Appendix



American employees are most likely to say that their bosses do a poor job providing them growth opportunities and accepting feedback from others

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





Four in 10 American Workers have blocked an old toxic boss from following them on social media



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