

CHOOSE YOUR BOSS

Carefully

Attentive listening and trusting your gut can prevent working for a toxic employer. Clues to recognize before you interview.

KEVIN* WOULD BE THE FIRST TO SAY THAT in his enthusiasm to land a position at a pain clinic, he ignored an important warning sign during his interview. Married with a two-year-old son and another child on the way, he found the small, friendly Midwestern community a perfect environment for his growing family. Since he had recently completed a pain fellowship, the thought of working in a practice where he could have an immediate impact was exciting.

The clue that Kevin overlooked was right there in his interview with his soon-to-be boss, the medical director of the center. Or, rather, it was out in the hallway where the medical director excused himself to deal with a patient issue.

* A pseudonym

Although he doesn't recall the exact words, Kevin clearly remembers the medical director using a "loud, sarcastic, demeaning tone" with an unseen staff person. Kevin never treated staff that way and it was disconcerting to him to hear the one-sided conversation. He says that the incident definitely made him feel uncomfortable. But, as Kevin recalls, the medical director was very personable during the remainder of the interview. Later that day, the center's practice manager even pulled Kevin aside to apologize for the medical director, making a point to tell Kevin that this had been a particularly stressful day and asking him not to take that into account in making his decision. Much to his regret, Kevin didn't.

Seduced by the attractive possibilities of both practice and community, Kevin didn't make any further inquiries into the medical director's demeanor or the day-to-day work atmosphere at the center. He accepted the offer based



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on that single site visit and eagerly made arrangements to move his family and to begin what he hoped would be a rewarding part of his career.

Sadly, the mean-spirited tone Kevin heard in the hallway was a regular part of the medical director's communications repertoire. This boss yelled at everyone on the staff, consistently and publicly berating them with comments like: "I could take anyone off the street and they would do a better job than you! And be smarter than you!" Within a few months, the director started openly

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humiliating Kevin as well. After Kevin's billing declined (brought about by the medical director changing the patient mix), his employer made sarcastic remarks to the nurses about "having to subsidize" Kevin. Perhaps predictably, the medical director's destructive personality carried over into underhanded business practices. Kevin was actually relieved when the medical director finally terminated his employment after three years.

Kevin was so traumatized by the experience that he has worked locum tenens for the past five years specifically to avoid the risk of placing his fortunes in the hands of another toxic boss.

As Stan Wynett, a regular contributor to the *National Business Employment Weekly* and the author of *The Job Hunter's Crystal Ball* (Adams Publishing, 2006) says, "Whenever you are looking for a new job, you are also—whether you like it or not—looking for a new boss." Sadly, toxic bosses are a fact of life. In a perfect world, everyone would work for a boss who is fair, considerate, and thoughtful, but not all bosses are built that way. Some are aggressive, paranoid, narcissistic, rigid, or unethical. Some so poison the work environment that they can have deleterious effects on both your emotional well-being and your career.

Obviously, the best course would be to avoid working for a tyrannical boss in the first place. The \$64,000 question, though, is how can you possibly know what kind of boss you'll be getting before you accept the offer?

Keep your ears wide open

Unfortunately, it's unlikely an interviewer will ever say, "Just between us, I let my insecurities make me paranoid, which in turn makes me incredibly volatile. Who knows when I'll erupt next!" So, if you want to avoid a toxic boss, you are going to have to make an effort to figure out just what type of person your future boss is.

Careful listening is a great place to start. Sure, your first instinct is to make a good impression so you'll get the job, but you should also pay close attention to what your prospective employer is saying and how he is saying it. If you spend some time and mental energy evaluating the person sitting across the table from you, you just might find that you don't want this job after all.

Wynett says that "responsive listening takes practically no talent or brains. Being a good listener encourages your interviewer to open up to you. To an attentive listener, interviewers will almost always volunteer more information about the

Do's and Don'ts for Dealing with a Toxic Boss

- ✓ Do recognize that although your boss may be toxic to you, she has some skill that is valued in the organization.
- ✓ Don't overlook the fact that you may be part of the problem. Make an honest assessment of your performance and see if there is anything you can change to improve the situation.
- ✓ Do act professionally in all circumstances.
- ✓ Don't compromise your reputation by reducing your productivity or avoiding work by feigning illness.
- ✓ Don't confront your boss when either of you is angry or upset.
- ✓ Do consider meeting with your boss to tell him the impact his behavior is having on you and your work. Be prepared for your boss to have an emotional reaction, but don't allow him to yell at you or demean you.
- ✓ Do keep a journal of your boss's bad behavior. Don't use judgmental language; stick to the facts. Use this when you talk to your boss or his boss.
- ✓ Do try to find other workers who have had similar bad experiences with your boss. Consider going as a group to human resources.
- ✓ Do try to find a mentor who can serve as a sounding board for your frustrations and who might be able to take the bad behavior you've documented and help do something about your boss. ■

job than they intended. There is no limit to what you can learn by listening and asking questions."

Tory Johnson, the CEO of Women for Hire, a company specializing in the recruitment of women from various fields, agrees. Johnson has advised asking prospective bosses direct but non-threatening questions. She has said that one of the best questions you can ask is why is the position vacant? Ask about the turnover in the department, office, or hospital. If the position is vacant because someone's been promoted, that's a great sign. However, if the response is they've had trouble keeping someone, warning bells should sound.

Of course, as we all know, sometimes it's not what is said, but how it's said that makes all

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the difference. To this end, Roy Lubit, MD, PhD, an executive coach and the author of *Coping with Toxic Managers, Subordinates. . . and Other Difficult People* (Prentice Hall, 2004) suggests asking straightforward questions about something simple such as past business growth and carefully observing whether the prospective boss's answer has more of "we did this" or "I did this."

In other words, is the boss narcissistic or anxious to share credit? Like Johnson, Lubit says to ask about the person who previously held the position and then listen to whether the boss "bashes the person or soft-pedals" the reason the job is now open. According to Lubit, aside from listening to the actual information offered in response, you should always be looking for any signs of "anger or self-centeredness" coming from an interviewer.

Lubit says that what you are doing when you ask a question about something like past business growth is the same thing the interviewer is probably doing to you—it's called behavioral event interviewing. By asking a person to discuss a specific event, the questioner has the opportunity to gain insights based not only on what is said in response, but how it is said. Does an eagerness to blame others show up in the answer? Is there a hint of anger or jealousy? Is she overly defensive in talking about turnover among staff?

If you sense a lot of negative emotions in what you're hearing, you may want to keep walking when you leave



Roy Lubit, MD, PhD, an executive coach and author, suggests evaluating a potential boss with the Pittsburgh Airport Test. "Imagine that you and your interviewer are stranded at the airport in Pittsburgh during a snowstorm. Would you a) try to hide so he can't find you because the thought of spending time with this person is so terrible; b) get a drink and hope for the best; or c) hope it doesn't stop snowing because this is a fun person to be with."

the interview.

Listen to your gut

What if there just wasn't a good opportunity for you to do much "behavioral event interviewing" or you simply don't hear any tell-tale clues that this particular boss is an ego-maniac or a workplace bully? No matter, because

you've surely had time during the interview to form a "gut reaction" to this boss and, believe it or not, you should trust your instincts when it comes to figuring out whether you can work collegially with this person.

Lubit recommends trying something he calls the Pittsburgh Airport Test.

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“Imagine that you and your interviewer are stranded at the airport in Pittsburgh during a snowstorm,” he says. “Would you a) try to hide so he can’t find you because the thought of spending time with this person is so terrible; b) get a drink and hope for the best; or c) hope it doesn’t stop snowing because this is a fun person to be with.” An honest answer to this imagined scenario could tell you all you need to know.

Think relying on your intuition is a bit simplistic? Perhaps so, but it turns out that your intuition, also referred to as “the adaptive unconscious,” is a powerful and surprisingly accurate predictor of the behavior of others.

In his bestselling book *Blink* (Little, Brown and Company, 2005), Malcolm Gladwell writes about an experiment in which students were given three 10-second videotape clips of a teacher and were then asked to rate the teacher’s effectiveness. These ratings, based on a mere 30 seconds of total viewing, predicted with a great degree of accuracy the ratings these same teachers received from students after a whole semester. In fact, even when the students were shown just two seconds of videotape, the ratings were still strikingly consistent with the semester-long ratings.

The simple fact is that we almost instantaneously analyze most things that we see. In his book *Intuition: Its Powers and Perils* (Yale University Press, 2002), psychology professor David Meyers describes an experiment in which people evaluated an image of a face or an object after seeing it for just 200 milliseconds. Since it’s difficult to imagine an interview lasting less than 200 milliseconds, make it a point to pay attention to what your “adaptive unconscious” tells you about the person waxing on about the great

career opportunity this job presents. Don’t fret that you’re making a snap judgment. The fact is, you do it all the time, and it can be a valid way of making reasonable and appropriate personal decisions.

Listen to what others have to say

Kevin, the job candidate at the pain center, overheard a clear signal that his boss might be a difficult person. According to Lubit, Kevin should have tried to determine whether the outburst was “state or trait.” In other words, was demeaning the staff-person in the hall the result of a particular situation—or state—such as an especially stressful day, as the office manager said, or was it part of the medical director’s personality—or trait. Since Kevin didn’t ask any follow-up questions, was he out of luck?

The fact is, Kevin could have taken steps after the interview to assess the potential toxicity of his boss. Most simply, he could have talked to the people who have direct knowledge of the medical director’s management style and personality—the other employees. Who better to talk to than people who have had long exposure to the boss and have seen him react in a wide variety of situations? In addition to the snapshot Kevin got during his interview, other employees could have given him more of a narrative. And that’s what you want. Anyone could have an occasional outburst or make a bad decision, but if you discover that your future boss is starring in his own horror movie, you don’t want to be in that show.

Opinions vary, however, as to whether to ask existing employees about their employer. Wynett says that interviewing current employees would be “an invasion of their privacy” but

says that if “you can gain access to previous employees . . . it would be perfectly okay to chat them up over the working environment” you’re considering joining. If you are considering a large practice or hospital, or a position in a corporation, it shouldn’t be too difficult to find someone who has worked with your future boss in some capacity. It could be well worth the time to make some inquiries.

Joan* was a resident at an East Coast rehabilitation hospital. The more time she spent at the hospital, the more sure she was that “the culture” at the hospital was a problem. By the time she was a third-year resident, she understood that the problems with the culture started at the top and that the president of the hospital was a toxic boss who “infected the entire atmosphere of the hospital.”

She says the president would stand at an overpass between the parking lot and the hospital and record the times that the doctors arrived and then report these times at staff meetings and berate those who were late. Frequently he brought his two dogs to staff meetings. According to Joan, he was abrasive and overbearing to all the doctors and the staff and did not have a good working relationship with anyone.

Unfortunately, the attending doctors all suffered because of the president’s caustic style. “They were scared of him and would literally panic if something went wrong,” she says. She remembers one incident in which she called an attending regarding a problem with a patient but the attending’s orders were not helpful. During M&M rounds, so fearful was the attending about the possible ramifications of her mistake that she lied about Joan having called her. The attending later wrote a letter

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to Joan apologizing for her behavior but that she was too afraid of the hospital president to tell the truth.

When the hospital approached Joan about an attending position, she didn't hesitate to decline because she knew this was not a place that she could be happy and have a good practice.

Over the years, Joan says she has shared her experience with other doctors considering attending positions at that particular hospital. These doctors found her the same way you can find a previous employee from where you are considering working—networking with your colleagues. Ask if anyone knows someone who worked at such and such hospital, and you might be surprised at how small the world is. Of course, not everyone will be willing to talk but it's worth an effort.

This can be a more challenging endeavor if you're looking at a small practice like Kevin was, but in that case, consider broadening your search and speaking not only with doctors and nurses but administrative staff. It's likely that they can all contribute to your understanding of what type of atmosphere you would encounter.

Johnson, the CEO of Women for Hire, says even doing an Internet search on the potential boss might be valuable. If you are considering a somewhat larger practice, hospital, etc., you might even find that there is a company chat room on the Internet. Johnson gives the example of Carla Fiorina, the former CEO of Hewlett-Packard, who was forced out after a series of layoffs at the company and a difficult merger with Compaq. A Hewlett-Packard chat site indicated that the company morale was "really bad and getting worse" before Fiorina was forced out.

Obviously, not all of the positions you

might be considering will be at companies like Hewlett-Packard, and you may not find a chat site that can help you. The point is that the Internet can be a rich source of information.

An important caveat to keep in mind whenever you talk to (or read comments from) a current or former employee is that this person may have an axe to grind even if he was treated fairly by the boss. Unless you know something about the source, it's probably best not to rely solely on the opinions of one person.

Find out too late?

What if your boss is just a master of disguise or you get a new boss at the job you already have? Are your only options to quit or wait to get fired?

Grace* took her first job out of a pediatric residency at a clinic-based large group practice in Northern California. Nothing about the interviews set off any alarms and she felt comfortable with the doctors with whom she would be working most closely. Soon after she started, however, she ran into some problems with the doctor who was in charge of all the pediatricians in the group and was a high-ranking administrator in the practice.

The first sign that things would not go swimmingly was when this administrator forced Grace to switch her day off to accommodate his personal schedule. Grace chalked it up to being the new kid on the block, but over time she saw that this administrator was autocratic in almost all of his dealings with the pediatricians. At meetings, he would announce an initiative, refute any criticism other doctors raised, and implement exactly what he had said he was going to do. While Grace describes this administrator as being a very engaging, socially adept

person, he was an excessively rigid boss and morale began to suffer because of it.

Fortunately for Grace and her colleagues, every year the physicians in the group were asked to rate their administrators on a confidential basis. Over the course of several years, the pediatricians' complaints about this administrator and the overall low morale of the doctors and staff forced the larger group to bring in an outside consultant to evaluate this administrator's effectiveness. He stepped down months later.

Quitting isn't the only option; sometimes the boss can be the one to leave. Just realize that the boss probably has some particular skill or brings some value to the job (which explains why he is the boss in the first place) and it may take some time to build a record which shows that the negative effects of his temperament outweigh his strengths. Of course, if the boss also owns the place, there may not be much you can do, and leaving might be best.

If you do leave, even if it's because your boss has been a holy terror and you loathe his very existence, be professional. Give your boss and colleagues plenty of notice, write a diplomatic letter of resignation (no need for a lengthy explanation), and don't badmouth the job after you're gone. Just as you might make some calls about a new boss, your next boss will likely do the same. The medical world may be smaller than you think, and you never know whose path you may cross in the future.

Finally, if you do leave, here's hoping you take steps to find the workplace angel you deserve. ■

Jim Silver is a former federal prosecutor who is currently writing a book on criminal law to be published in 2007.