

# Employees Can't Fix Stupid Managers

You may have a boss who you think is stupid, but you should know that being stupid is not necessarily illegal. Most supervisors, managers, senior executives, senior Foreign Service officers and Ambassadors are competent and approachable. The Department is consistently a very highly rated workplace.

Yet in the Office Civil Rights, we receive complaints that indicate that some of the Department's leaders fall quite short.

What can you do if you believe that your particular boss is routinely stupid, inept, impolite, rude, distant, humorless, unfunny, silly, arrogant, stubborn, mean, insensitive, narrow-minded or pompous?

Bad character and personality flaws may well be irksome, but they do not qualify as violations of one's civil rights. To be a valid Equal Employment Opportunity or civil rights complaint, the problem must involve impermissible behavior or decision-making, not just character traits.

Here is what qualifies: discriminatory behavior or actions based on race, color, age, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, religion, marital or parental status, or disability that also result in negative consequences for your career, conditions of employment or ability to work effectively.

Unfairness does not necessarily equate to an EEO issue. For example, you might disagree with how your supervisor assigns work and consider this practice unfair and unwise. However, this is not illegal unless you believe that it is being done for discriminatory reasons. You can't simply say your supervisor is being unfair or unwise. Your supervisor is responsible for managing the work and will in some cases make decisions that you will not like. In these kinds of cases, it is best to have a conversation with your supervisor to discuss your concerns and offer suggestions.

As for being stupid, there are actions you can take if you feel your supervisor is making your worklife difficult,

actions that don't involve an EEO complaint. You should consider pushing back, mediating, having a critical conversation or leaving the job.

**Pushing back**—Because someone is your boss or colleague doesn't mean you have to be the victim of teasing, rudeness or other offensive actions. Assertiveness training and using assertiveness techniques can help you take charge. You can also take a complaint up the chain of command. Don't be a pushover. The books *Nice Girls*

*Don't Get the Corner Office* and *When I Say No, I Feel Guilty*, by Lois P. Frankel and Manuel J. Smith, respectively, may prove helpful.

**Mediating**—Often an objective third party such as a trained mediator, colleague or friend held in common can help you speak truth to someone in power and gain a change of behavior. The Office of Civil Rights can help you find a resource or provide a mediator outside the EEO process.

**Having a Critical Conversation**—The Foreign Service Institute offers a course on this topic, and there is a book by the same name.

**Leaving**—There is nothing noble about suffering silently for weeks, months or years, or suffering loudly by whining endlessly about your boss. The problem in federal service

is not that employees who become disgruntled with their boss get disgusted and leave. It is that they stay on the job but are disengaged, resentful and bitter. So if none of the above works, leave. Get another job with a boss who deserves your best efforts. Life is too short, and if you have talent, there will be a good place for you somewhere.

You may not be able to "fix" stupid managers, but you can take steps to improve your situation. ■



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