

Bosses' Big Day

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Don't tell us you haven't ordered the philodendron? What, no roses? No cake? No fountain pen? No office greeting card affectionately annotated?

Your boss is right. You are a schlump. A no-good, do-nothing, lazy, incompetent boob.

You should be ashamed of yourself. It's a wonder you have a job.

After all, tomorrow is bosses day. Bosses day, friend, that red-letter day in the annals of workplace goodwill. Seven-point-five blissful hours in which you, cubical chump, get to serenade HIM (or her), mercurial supervisor, for giving you the chance to work under him.

So what if she's a peevish tyrant who treats her Filofax as if it were the Book of Deuteronomy. Never mind if he's a conniving, grasping thief who filches your every good idea as if it were candy corn. Overlook, for a few hallowed hours, the hail of e-mails he launches through the tattered membrane of what used to be your self-esteem.

You love your boss. She has made you a better person.

Or so say the folks at Hallmark, who have a lot to gain from workplace comity.

The folks at Hallmark say the office environment has improved considerably since the days of, well, Captain Ahab. Today, says Hallmark, the boss is not an imperious ogre who sacrifices lambs like you in the board room. No, no, no. The boss "often is both coach and a member of the work team." Equal parts Bobby Knight and Donald Trump.

So what do you get for such a person?

After all, she's already wearing Prada.

"Certainly, if the relationship is not good, then gifting the supervisor will seem odd and forced and not likely to help matters," said Donna Flagg, workplace expert and the principal of The Krysalis Group, a human resource and management consulting firm in New York City.

"People should do what feels natural and fitting. The safest and most appropriate thing to do is wish him/her a 'Happy Bosses Day.' From there, individuals should do what makes sense for the tone and familiarity of the relationship. If the relationship is good, a cup of coffee could be a good start."

It would also help to actually know that there is something called National Bosses Day, which took Mary Beth Thompson by surprise. "Isn't every day a national-something-or-other-day?" says Thompson, who lives in Waterbury. "I can't keep up."

The problem with bosses day is that it's difficult to win. Ignore the boss and you're not only a cad, but you risk dropping a notch lower on your bosses' (ahem) esteem. Favor the boss and you could be seen as the office suck-up, trying to butter up the boss for your own advancement.

Plus, you make everybody else look bad.

But what if you don't like the boss? In that case, ignoring bosses day -- which a dissatisfied worker is inclined to do -- could only make it worse. That's particularly true, said Norwich-based image consultant Diane Daniels, if everybody else likes the boss.

"It can be difficult if you have a bad relationship but to your co-workers, this person is the beloved supervisor," she says. "If you and this person have personality differences, then you look funny if you just ignore the day."

The experts' advice: Suck it up and smile.

"It's important to have harmony in the office," says Jacqueline Whitmore, author of "Business Class: Etiquette Essentials for Success at Work" (St. Martin's). "You may disagree with your boss or you may disagree with policies. You're still an employee there and you still need to act in a cordial manner regardless. Sign your name on the card. Show up while everybody's eating bagels. A lot of times we have to do things that we don't want to do."

Like, go to work, for instance.

Workers everywhere have Patricia Bays Haroski to thank for putting them in this awkward position. In 1958, she successfully petitioned to enshrine National Bosses Day in the annals of superfluous American holidays. She believed supervisors got no empathy. She ought to have known; her boss was her daddy.

In the old days, says Whitmore, giving a boss a gift was a no-no. But the Palm Beach, Fla.-based etiquette expert says that's no longer the case, particularly with the growth of smaller companies.

"We're finding now that people are becoming very close to their co-workers," she says. "Their colleagues are becoming more like extended family, so they get to know these people very, very well."

Surveys seem to bear this out. A poll by Harris Interactive reported that employees at small firms (49 employees or less) report far greater job satisfaction than do employees at large firms.

Whitmore's rule of thumb: Have co-workers go in on a small gift. Better yet, bring in bagels, brownies or doughnuts. "That way you're not necessarily giving. It's just another day to celebrate something else."

Which, of course, is just what we need.

So what do you get? Daniels, the Norwich-based Image Consultant and Coach, suggests a small work-related gift, but nothing too personal. A set of refills for their favorite pen, perhaps a different model of their favorite pen, a decorative item for their desk (frames work well if they have family or a spouse) or something they've recently shown an interest in -- a book of quotations from their favorite business expert, for instance. Any or all of these items could be appropriate for either a boss or a subordinate without putting too much emphasis on the personal side of a relationship, and without straying dangerously close to "sucking up" territory."

Kate Zabriskie, founder of the Maryland-based Business Training Works, Inc., suggests something that doesn't stand out too much. "If you are going to give an individual gift, go with something small that doesn't sit out in public all day. A big bouquet of flowers says sucking up or something worse. A nice book on a topic the boss is interested in does not."

Appropriate gifts:

Gift certificate to a movie

Small book of quotations from their favorite business expert

Refills for their favorite pen

Decorative item for their desk

Picture frame, particularly if the supervisor has a family

Gift basket with local products

Bosses Day History:

In 1958, Patricia Bays Haroski, then an employee at State Farm Insurance Company in Deerfield, Ill., believed that managers get no respect. She wanted to designate a day to show her appreciation for her boss and others in that unsung role. She also hoped to improve the relationship between employees and supervisors. Her manager was her father. That year, Haroski registered the holiday with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, thereby enshrining Oct. 16 as a cumbersome day for anybody who gets a paycheck.

Why, Oct. 16, you may ask? That was Haroski's daddy's birthday.

How do employees feel about their boss

Only 1 out of 2 employees feels their supervisors involve them in decisions.

Three out of 10 employees do not feel they are treated with respect by their supervisors

Four out of 10 employees do not feel that their supervisor clearly communicates goals and assignments.

Four out of 10 employees do not feel their boss listens to their suggestions and three out of 10 say their boss isn't even available to them to answer questions

Only 1 out of 2 employees feels their supervisor does a good job of solving people-related problems

Source: American Management Association

Who's the Boss

An estimated 49.2 million people are employed in management, professional, and related occupations. And workplace surveys confirm that one of the most important elements of job satisfaction is a positive relationship between a supervisor and worker.

Boss' Day Etiquette -- How to Recognize the Occasion Without Sucking Up

Also, unless you know your boss really likes plaques and other boss-specific gifts, don't do it. Ask an elementary school teacher if he or she wants any more apple paraphernalia. Boss mugs, mouse pads, and other dust collectors fall into the same category.

Consider a group gift. If, for instance, you are an administrative assistant, think about getting with the other administrative assistants in the office and planning a really good boss' breakfast spread that everyone can enjoy. No favoritism, no awkward moments, just good bagels.

Source: Kate Zabriskie, founder of Business Training Works, Inc.