

3 Signs That Your Future Boss Might Be a Bad Boss

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Keeping an eye open for these red flags during the interview process could save you trouble later.

“Your new boss didn’t even offer you a glass of water?” my mother had questioned me in disbelief. “After how many interviews? You should not take that job. I am telling you not to take that job.”

I had received a call from a recruiter to interview with one of the biggest beauty brands in the world. This was my chance to catapult my career into a company that didn’t often have job openings at my level, but didn’t have the best Glassdoor reviews. And I didn’t have time to ask too many questions. The recruiter had given me 48 hours notice to come in and do interviews. I had shared with my mother that I did close to a dozen in-person interviews, 30 minutes each, back-to-back.

During those interviews, no one ever offered me a glass of water. Not the recruiter who greeted me. Not the other individuals who interviewed me. And no, not my future boss. I remember that at some point I had to use the bathroom. My future boss seemed annoyed that I asked

where the ladies' room was. I scurried into the bathroom quickly, not wanting to be late for the next interview.

This was one of the handful of times in my career that I didn't listen to my mother. The recruiter made me an offer the next day, and I accepted on the spot. I was desperate to work at this big beauty brand with a fancy title that I know so many other candidates were vying for. And my future boss did, indeed, go on to display many characteristics of a bad boss.

Other than the "water test," as I coined it, thanks to my mom, I have missed a number of other red flags during interview processes. Now I coach individuals who are looking for their next opportunity to watch for these three signs; they may indicate you are about to work for a bad boss:

1. Doesn't seem interested in interviewing you

In that specific interview at a beauty company, I remember my future boss walking in late (with no apology), sitting down abruptly, and firing off the first question. He was scrolling on his phone as I tried hard to be energetic to get his attention. After I was done with that answer, there was a long awkward pause, and then he stumbled, asked another question, and was staring out the window. For most of the interview, he was slouched away from me, fidgeting with a pen, and barely made eye contact.

If your future boss is distracted or disengaged, without any explanation, this could be a telltale sign of what it's like to work for them. I could also signal bigger issues brewing at the company. Staff may be overwhelmed by work and not capable of staying present in the conversation. They may be forced into hiring someone for their team. They may be disgruntled or disinterested in their work. Study their body language and nonverbal cues as well as what they say (or don't say). If they're unhappy, chances are this will impact how they manage you.

2. Makes sarcastic comments about your résumé or the company

"Is Been-gali really a language? Or did you just make that up to sound impressive?" joked a potential future boss. This was in an interview I had a few years after I had worked at that big beauty brand. "Why don't you say something? Like 'Hi . . . my name is . . .'"

In my "additional information" section on my résumé, I listed that I'm fluent in Bengali. After what I thought was a pretty good interview, this potential future boss doubted whether Bengali was even a language. He did it right at the end of the interview as I was about to walk out. Thankfully I spotted this red flag, so when the recruiter called, I declined to go any further in the interview process.

During the interview, watch for comments like these from a potential future boss, either about your résumé or the company you're interviewing for.

- Making fun of activities in your additional information section:

You volunteer at a nonprofit?

So are you one of those do-gooders?

You have a black belt in karate?

Can you show me some of those Mr. Miyagi moves?

- Dropping sarcastic comments about former companies on your résumé:

I can't believe you worked at that competitor.

Their products suck.

How did you get a job at that place?

Aren't they bankrupt?

- Sharing disparaging comments about the current company:

I hope they warned you that this place is a real mess.

Well, we are hiring for a number of roles right now, tough times here.

Watch for even an innocent joke, an offhand comment, or sarcastic remark. It may be a window into their leadership style or dysfunction occurring at the company.

3. Takes up most of the airtime

I once was interviewing at a software company where the future potential boss would ask a question and go on to answer it himself. "Let's talk about a time when you failed to lead a project. I remember once when I was . . ." After he talked and talked, I was able to squeeze in a quick response until he interrupted me again. He asked another question, and then another, and pretty much took up all the airtime in the interview. I barely had time to share about my experiences.

If you witness a future potential boss talking incessantly, answering their own questions, or interrupting you in an interview, this could be a sign they have some bad behaviors. If you do end up working for them, be prepared that they might talk more than they listen. They may ignore or dismiss your ideas. They may lecture you instead of coaching and collaborating. They may also be the type of boss who believes it's their way or the highway, and makes decisions on their own without the team's input.

If you don't see any of red flags in an interview process but still end up working for a bad boss, don't beat yourself up. Most future bosses should be on their best behavior, trying to court candidates during interviews.

Finally, if you're actively looking for a new job, you may see some of red flags and still choose to accept the job. For many of us, the reality of having bills to pay can outweigh any potential bad boss behavior. Nonetheless, spotting red flags can help prepare you for what it might be like to actually work for a particular person, and at a particular employer.