

By Steve Tobak

Note: This article originally appeared as [an entry in BNET's The Corner Office blog](#).

The other day I was interviewed for a story titled "[Conan O'Brien is living the ultimate employee fantasy](#)." In venting his frustrations with NBC's management, Conan achieved personal satisfaction, high ratings, and \$40 million to go away.

Sure, he burned some bridges. But look at it this way: NBC screwed him and he vented. That's a wash in my book. All in all, I'd say he made out okay.

But the whole incident got me thinking: We hear loads about bosses who are jerks, but what about *employees* who are jerks? What about public displays of vehement disagreement bordering on insubordination? I mean, when and how is it okay to disagree with the boss? Is it always okay to speak your mind? Is it ever a good idea to disparage your management, as Conan did?

To answer these and other thorny questions, I've come up with a set of rules. If you're angry at your boss or disagree with management and feel the need to speak up, ignore this list at your peril.

Tobak's 10 rules of management conflict

1 Stay calm

Never react in anger or blow your stack. If you're so PO'd that you can't trust yourself to be calm, go away and come back when you can be. The workplace is no place for that kind of behavior, period.

2 Attack the problem, not the person

When you criticize or attack someone personally, you risk burning a bridge. Focus on the real issues at hand. You know, what the company actually pays you to do.

3 Be open and honest

The second you grit your teeth, cross your arms, and close your mind, you give in to stubborn childish behavior. But if you remain open and keep your wits about you, you'll manage to do the right thing in a tough situation.

4 Don't lose perspective

Try to remember that you're being paid to do a job, not to fight a war. The workplace is about business. You know, customers, products, that sort of thing. It's not about you... or your boss.

5 Try to be empathetic

Put yourself in your boss' shoes and try to understand his or her perspective. If you can't do that, or you're not sure what it is, ask. Your assumptions may be wrong. If your boss does the same, next thing you know, you have detente.

6 Take the high road

Taking the high road doesn't mean staying quiet when something needs to be said. It means saying it at a time and place and in a manner that's reasonable and respectful of all present. If you kick yourself afterward, you probably didn't do it right.

7 Have faith in yourself

The workplace is no place for yes-men. You were hired for a reason, and it wasn't to blindly march along with the pack. If that's what management wants, you work for a crappy company.

8 Don't go at it in public

If you do, be prepared to apologize in public and, worst case, be fired for insubordination. Accomplished managers and executives really do not like to be publicly eviscerated. Would you?

9 Then let them have it

As long as you follow the preceding eight rules, it's okay to go for it. Just try to be civilized.

10 Disagree and commit

This comes from Andy Grove's Intel. Keeping your mouth shut when you disagree isn't being a good soldier. But disagreeing, losing the fight, and committing to help the winning plan succeed, now *that's* being a good soldier.

Following these rules will do wonders for your management career. Who knows; maybe you can be the next Andy Grove.

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