

Argus Leader

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LIFE MONDAY

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Learn to stand up for yourself in a TOXIC WORKPLACE

Bullying bosses, harassment, affairs can have dire effect on health, success

By Dorene Weinstein
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Destructive bosses, harmful co-workers, undermining colleagues – many of us have had at least one of these.

There was the boss who insisted on knowing everyone's whereabouts at every moment. A worker was required to put a Post-it note on his monitor saying bathroom, lunch, meeting – listing a reason whenever he stepped away from his desk.

Or the boss who printed all emails and kept them in a locked filing cabinet.

And what about the boss who's having an affair with his secretary?

Many people don't feel they can quit a job just because it's unpleasant. With the current job market and the stumbling economy, employees can feel more trapped than ever.

But there are options, says Linnda Durré, Ph.D, psychotherapist and author of "Surviving the Toxic Workplace." Some of her suggestions for workers include going to higher-ups, going to their union or seeking legal advice.

A toxic workplace is "an emotional environment of fear, verbal and/or physical abuse, mistrust and doubt that is built on power, control, money and ego to manipulate people," Durré says.

These days, though, people seem quicker to report complaints or grievances to government agencies such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission or the Occupational Safety and Health Administration than ever before. Complaints then force an investigation by the company, says Gene Elrod, senior vice president of human resources and loss prevention at Lewis Drug for 35 years.

Having a clear path to follow in

difficult work situations can help empower the employee, Elrod says.

Any situation that constitutes a hostile work environment, such as harassment, directly involves human resources, he says. Those cases are governed by federal guidelines.

Employees want to know what to do when a problem occurs, when to report it and how it will be solved. A plan of action helps give them control, Elrod says.

Working under duress can have far-reaching effects on your health, your life and the success of a company, Durré says.

You have to be able to stand up for yourself and confront situations at the moment, she says.

For example, if you are dealing with sexual harassment, Durré says, you must be assertive. Say: "What you are doing is illegal; I can report you to the state. I have a job to do, and it doesn't include having sex with you."

If you are exposed to racist behavior, Durré suggests dealing with it head-on. Say: "I really like you and enjoy working with you, and I hear you making negative remarks about others. I find it offensive, and I want you to stop it. It's illegal, and people can get fired."

Some words to avoid at work include "we'll see," "I'll get back to you" and "whatever," which are meant to be passive, escape responsibility or dismissive, Durré says.

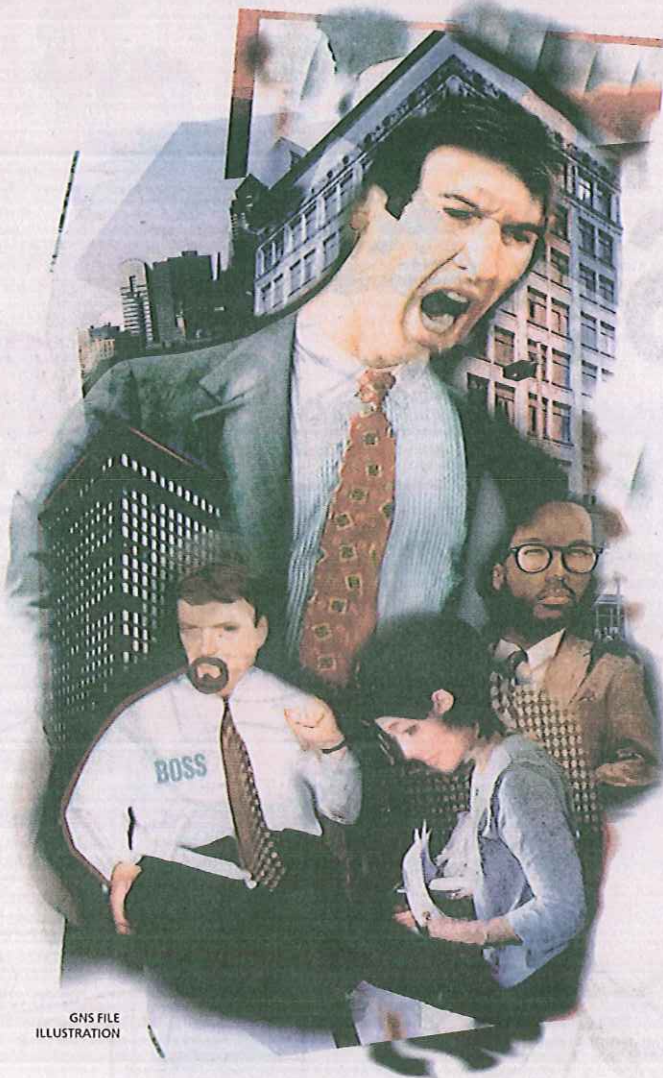
Understanding others is empowering, she says. "Although some people are truly evil, most people aren't. They just bring their craziness and dysfunction to work."

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"Surviving the Toxic Workplace" by Linnda Durré is available on amazon.com.

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