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Bratty Behavior

TERRIBLE OFFICE TYRANTS (TOTS) are at their most terrible when they behave like all-out brats. When your boss morphs into monster mode, you can count on a bad day . . . or a bad week.

Some of the most striking parallels between toddlers and TOTS are, well, also the most obnoxious. A boss who wants a report “Now!” bears an uncanny resemblance to an unruly little kid in the supermarket candy aisle.

A child who bullies others because he’s bigger and tougher can be seen in a manager who constantly reminds his team “who’s in charge.” And yes, both TOTS and toddlers can pitch a whopper of a tantrum, although unfortunately, your boss isn’t as likely to throw himself on the ground and cry. (One can dream, though!)

Like small children, bosses like to get their way. That often involves acting out in ways that you thought were limited to little kids faced with a plate of vegetables or the threat of no more video games. To make things worse, a petulant TOT, unlike a child, has direct authority over your livelihood. That’s when Bratty Behavior is no longer just annoying . . . it can be life changing.

By understanding what’s behind the bluster, you can usually tame your TOT—or at the very least, mitigate unpleasant

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situations. You might sometimes feel inclined to fight fire with fire, but all that does is get you fired. So be creative and “manage up” when the Terrible Twos appear in the corner office.

Inside this section of *Tame Your Terrible Office Tyrant*, you’ll learn how to recognize the telltale signs of an impending brat attack—as well as how to deal with one. Each chapter includes a look at how TOTs and toddlers act out in common, a real-life story about how an employee like you dealt with a challenging boss, and a set of helpful TOT Taming Tips.

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Bragging

About Bragging

IT'S A BIG DAY in the office because the CEO is dropping by. You've not only worked 24/7 for the past three weeks to cut marketing spending as much as humanly possible—but you've also prepared a detailed presentation, even cleaned the office, and made snacks for all the head honchos.

Now your Terrible Office Tyrant (TOT) saunters in with Big TOT (his boss), and, the CEO. You can't believe your ears. In under 30 seconds, your TOT has taken credit for the reduced budget, the slide presentation you slaved over, the office's pristine look, and—oh no, he didn't—your snicker-doodles?

Before you can register your disbelief (or even introduce yourself to the CEO), your glory hog TOT has planted the big boss in his office—and snagged all of the treats to boot. During the closed-door session, you hear phrases like: "When I saw we could cut . . ." and "Then I thought of an amazing, much cheaper way to

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achieve . . .,” punctuated by loud praise from the CEO, “Excellent! You are running a tight ship.”

By the time they emerge to go eat sushi, it’s hard to believe you even exist. Your boss has taken credit for everything. In fact, he’s painted himself to be the only functioning asset in the office.

“Yikes,” you think, “He’ll claim he invented the Internet by the end of lunch.”

But Why?

What just happened here? You realized that your boss is either the Most Powerful Man in the Universe—or the Biggest Hype in Town. When it was showtime at your office, your boss blew his own horn—at everyone else’s expense.

Self-promoting TOTs are everywhere. It’s a common trait in the working world, especially when the need to sell goes into overdrive. Talking yourself up is necessary, but, of course, there are some TOTs who escalate self-promotion, trying to elevate themselves above the rest of the world.

Often, their behavior has no ill intent—this kind of TOT simply wants attention or validation. For the most part, braggart bosses are more of a nuisance than a threat. Sometimes, though, TOTs deliberately put down others to bolster their own egos—or ensure their perception of worth in the eyes of their TOT. Like kids who shout, “Your painting is stupid, mine is better,” the worst of the blustering bosses leave a trail of hurt feelings and ill will in their wake. Even then, it’s still more hot air rather than an egomaniacal power trip.

Let’s look at the parallels between braggart bosses and kids who sing their own praises:



Bragging Toddler Behavior

Bragging TOT Behavior

He brags to his preschool classmates, "Teacher is my friend and not yours."

He brags to anyone within earshot how tight he is with the new CEO. But their only encounter was at a meeting where the CEO asked him to take notes.

She scoots down the slide 49 times, yelling "Watch me! I'm the fastest!" after every turn. If you fail to take note and applaud, she screams, "Mommy, watch me!"

In order to "teach" public speaking skills to the staff, he shows a DVD of his speech to a youth group 49 consecutive times. He stops the video frequently and says, "Let's watch again!"

When no one is looking, she draws crayoned circles all over the living room walls. She pulls you into the room. "Look!" she crows. "Best circles ever!"

Your boss grabs the client proposal you just completed. Her edits: adding the word "maybe" to every bullet point, weakening your pitch. She boasts that she transformed it into "a work of art."

Your toddler tells his little sister, "I can hit the ball over the fence and you can't. Na na, na na na."

You challenge his decision to take over a project that requires your specific skill set. He says, "I'll take the lead on this baby." You swear you heard a "Na na, na na na" at the end, too.

Mild gloating is usually tolerable. We all have egos and a little positive self-promotion can be a boost. Bragging only crosses the line when the frequency or volume gets ratcheted up—or when reality starts to distort.

You may find yourself wincing every time your boss struts in your direction to name-drop his many "connections" up the corporate ladder, not to mention politics and Hollywood.

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You may cringe when the laundry list of notable career achievements gets further inflated, thinking: “Wow, if he won ‘Employee of the Year’ as often as he said, he must have started here in kindergarten—or maybe he’s actually 112 years old!”

But your irritation might finally morph into fury when his boasting comes loaded with poisoned arrows aimed your way—or even worse, when he claims your accomplishments as his own. That’s the point at which you have to stop tuning out your TOT, and start building a defensive shield.

(For help dealing with true center-of-the-universe TOT behavior, check out Chapter 7 on *Self-Centeredness*.)

Bragging begins in late toddlerhood and is a normal developmental stage. The child learns she can do something new, and her excitement spills over into what sounds boastful, but might simply be celebration.

When she says “I made the picture,” she’s displaying pleasure and enthusiasm in her discovery that she can create something. And when she compares herself favorably to her peers—“I’m bigger/smarter/prettier than you are”—she’s working out exactly who she is. She doesn’t necessarily want to make others feel small and ugly—she just hasn’t discovered the harm her words create nor does she have the capacity for empathy yet.

Most kids figure out early that nobody likes a show-off, so they learn to temper their boastful behavior, but only after testing it. At some point, kids learn that more frequent or louder boasting works even less effectively than regular bragging. They dial it down and keep the big boasts in check.

“Tell Me I’m Great!”

TOTs who brag like toddlers have never resolved their identity issues or developed a capacity for empathy. They also have never

figured out that most people want to crawl under a rock when listening to them.

Most likely, they didn't receive enough reassurance growing up, and so they're still seeking it. They brag in order to find out if you actually do appreciate or respect them. They need to hear, "Yes, you are the most brilliant negotiator on the crew," because at age seven, they didn't hear "You are the best kickball player" often enough. The trouble is that many braggart TOTs seem to have an endless need for reassurance, and you can't make up for their childhood deprivation. (Check out Chapter 19 on *Neediness* for more ideas on dealing with deprived TOTs.)

The problem increases in competitive situations, where the TOT feels threatened. He fears looking bad next to colleagues, so he tries to convince you that he's better than they are, and better than you are.

True TOT Tales

Par for the Course

Selma works for a small computer software firm in Denver. If her boss ever heard a rumor that he was a big braggart, he'd probably freeze in his wingtips from surprise, because the behavior has become so ingrained. Here's Selma's story.

My boss has no shame. He's a big golfer and a bigger showoff, and I'm sick of hearing him cock-a-doodle-do about how great he did in his latest game. He sneaks out at 4:00 PM every Wednesday to play golf, which annoys me because I'm working 14-hour days just to keep my job intact. Then he justifies it by saying he makes all these great connections, and that golf is "integral" to his sales numbers.

Thursday morning is when the golf gloating starts. I know nothing about golf, but he makes me listen anyway. Then, in the

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usual “the golf course is my office” riff, he goes on about the deals he clinched and who he bonded with the day before. I know deals get done over golf, but the thing is, my boss has not landed one client from these outings!

This week, he came in beaming. He was especially psyched because he had golfed with a “key guy” from a Fortune 1000 company. He said we’d be a “shoo-in” for a big deal because they talked for hours and “literally hit it off.”

Later, as I dropped off a file on his desk, I noticed a scribble on a piece of paper mentioning that same Fortune 1000 company and the next golf date. It turns out this new golf pal was a “Management Trainee.” Wow!

I never called him on the fact that no business ever came in as a result of his networking acumen. But I started to use the inevitable weekly boss visits to get his sign-off on my ever-growing list of pending projects. I learned that I could get a lot done with one secret phrase, “How was your game?” Granted, I had to endure a bunch of sand-trap stories, but he became so agreeable that I’d wrap up work before anyone else. I actually learned about golf because of that. But I’m still skeptical about golfers.

Although Selma couldn’t escape her boss’s bragging, she was able to harness it for her own use. Fortunately, her boss didn’t stoop to boast at her expense. He didn’t put her down for not having a fancy club membership or for being not being “connected” like he is—he just wanted an admiring audience.

TOT-Taming Tips: Bragging

There are only so many times you can listen to tales about how your TOT impressed all the honchos of the universe with her charm and wit. Though you may understand why your TOT puffs herself up, she’ll probably strain your patience after a while, particularly if she points out the many ways in which she surpasses you.

How can you survive the braggadocio in your office? Here are some tips to deal with the blowhards and the windbags at work. In fact, they may be the best tips ever. (Okay, now that's bragging!)



DON'T DO THIS . . .

Encourage a Brag-Off. Let your TOT know that there are other TOTs out there making bigger and better claims than she is. Tell her, "Boss, when the customer service manager heard you say that our team was the greatest team ever, she said that her group was the greatest times two. And then the regional sales director said they were the greatest 'times infinity.' So I said you'll face off with them in the conference room at high noon."

Do This . . .

Help Dial It Down. Your boss truly might not be aware of the impact her competitive bragging has on others. You can let her know in a gentle way by saying something like, "It's great news about your high score on the management aptitude test, boss. You're amazing. I do think poor Ron was devastated when you said that you smoked him. I hope he isn't too bummed out. Maybe you could give him a word of encouragement?"



DON'T DO THIS . . .

Crow Louder. It's essential that you establish yourself as the smartest, fastest, coolest employee in the universe,

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so that you get promoted when the time comes. Adorn your office with every diploma you ever earned, including your dog's certificates for most-improved fetcher. If you find yourself in a room full of TOTs trying to out-boast each other, walk into the middle and say, "Oh yeah? Bet you didn't know I invented the FruitSharpener—the first pencil sharpener that emits fragrance! And a guy from IT said that I visited more web sites while working than anyone else!"

Do This . . .

Model Compassionate Behavior. Reign yourself in when you have something to boast about—and gently show your boss the friendly way to shine. Instead of making a big deal, keep your accomplishment to yourself and later, take your boss aside. Say something like, "I didn't want to make a fuss about getting nominated to the President's Circle because I didn't want Randy or Joanne to feel bad. They've worked so hard, and are good team members, so I'd rather keep this low-key." Hopefully, your boss will follow your example instead of jamming her achievements down everyone's throat.



DON'T DO THIS . . .

Be Your Boss's Publicist. If your TOT drones on about his accomplishments at every opportunity, help him get sick of hearing it himself. At every chance you get, brag for your

boss in front of him before he launches into his own song-and-dance: "Did you know that my boss has the highest IQ on the tenth floor?"

Do This . . .

Hold Up a Mirror for Your TOT. Clearly, your boss thinks that bragging will impress the flunkies or influence the Big or Super TOTs, or he wouldn't keep at it. You can help him learn discretion by pointing out another bombastic TOT. After witnessing a display of egotistical ranting from that TOT, look at your boss and say, "Gosh, you'd think that she'd know the top brass hates bragging. That's too bad."



DON'T DO THIS . . .

Pump Up the Volume. The next time your boss starts singing his own praises, break out the headphones and rock out to your favorite music to drown him out. If he's still there by the end of the song, ask, "Are you done bragging yet?" and if he says "no," repeat until you get a "yes."

Do This . . .

Be a Fan (within Reason). It can be irritating, but as long as your boss doesn't put you down as she builds herself up, try to table your annoyance. She really does need the pat on

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the back if she craves acknowledgment and praise to such a ridiculous extent. So tell her she's great and you appreciate her, at least once in a while. You might occasionally reserve the extra praise to reinforce positive behavior at the same time: "I'm so honored that you always value my feedback, boss, and that you want to share your accomplishments with me. I feel that whatever you accomplish, so do I. Thanks."

TOT-Busters Q&A

Question

My boss, Ned, drops names like crazy. When he goes to the doctor, he comes back and tells us about how famous his doctor is. His lawyer is famous, his neighbors are famous, and famous politicians sit next to him at benefits. He has a booth at a famous restaurant run by a famous chef. Now the menu includes "Ned's Duck L'Orange." I'm sick of it. How can I tell him to stop it or stuff it (Ned, not the duck)?

Answer

First try the indirect approach: "You must enjoy being around so many famous people." It might cause a moment of self reflection. But if not, try a diplomatic, yet direct approach. Tell Ned that you like him for who he is and what he does, not for who he knows—you value his leadership more than his speed-dial, in so many words. You'll probably have to repeat the message, but you might eventually hit a chord. Nonetheless, you may have to tolerate some celebrity gossip.



Points to Remember

- Bragging is generally more of a nuisance than a threat.
- When TOTs brag, it's often because they need validation from others to feel convinced of their own abilities.
- Competitive braggers often don't recognize the destructive impact of their comparisons and putdowns.
- Learn to tune out or tolerate braggadocio.
- To redirect a boastful boss, help her to recognize how she hurts people when she elevates herself above them.
- Gently teach your boss that boastful behavior nets no friends.
- Praise your boss within reason.

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