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HBR CASE STUDY COMMENTARY

Challenge The Boss or Stand Down?

**A rising-star executive calculates his response to
a hypercritical superior. *by W. Earl Sasser***

How should Tom respond to Frank's demands?

Expert commentary by Jeffrey Pfeffer and Paul Falcone

The Experts Respond



Jeffrey Pfeffer is the Thomas D. Dee II Professor of Organizational Behavior at the Graduate School of Business, Stanford University. He is the author of *Power: Why Some People Have It—and Others Don't* (HarperBusiness, 2010).

THOMAS GREEN faced a set of predictable problems that he failed to forestall. Instead of further poisoning his relationship with his boss by seeking to “expose” him, Tom should now start to repair the damage he’s done to both his professional relationships and his career prospects.

Tom’s first mistake was in neglecting to consider that he was not his boss’s choice for the position of senior marketing specialist. From the outset he should have recognized the significance of that initial strike against him and, therefore, should have made it a top priority to earn Frank’s trust right away. But he did just the opposite: failing to deliver an important report on time and not keeping Frank informed

Tom’s second mistake was in assuming that merely articulating his impression of the competitive threat from web-based offerings would immediately change the minds of his boss and others in the organization. Tom spent virtually no time building the close social ties with people that would give him the credibility to convince them of his perspective. For example, after his promotion, Tom didn’t brief Shannon on what he had learned and accomplished in his new role. She had no way of knowing about the contributions he was making and thus had little reason to continue to support him. Her only information about Tom was the negative feedback she had been seeing from Frank.

ments. Tom should also apply the power of flattery, which research shows is all but impossible to overuse. He should acknowledge Frank’s many years of experience and ask for his assistance in thinking through the competitive challenge that web services present to D7 Displays. Asking for help not only secures it, but also flatters the person being asked.

Finally, Tom must reconnect with Shannon in a carefully considered way. He should set up an in-person meeting with her rather than respond in an e-mail (which could be forwarded). In that meeting Tom needs to apologize for the problems with Frank and for not keeping Shannon adequately informed about his efforts, including learning about the competitive challenges facing the company and building new customer accounts. He should ask her to be his mentor, especially in working effectively with Frank. This outreach is likely to rekindle Shannon’s support for Tom.

Companies are social systems made up of individuals whose self-esteem must be taken into account. Tom needs to spend more of his time managing up if he wants to avoid getting managed out of D7 Displays.

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about his work in general. Most glaringly, he challenged his boss’s authority publicly. Tom may believe that hierarchy doesn’t matter so much in today’s corporate world, but bosses still love the sort of deference that validates their status.

Fortunately, it’s not too late for Tom to repair this damage, although he must act quickly. He should start by apologizing to Frank for challenging him in public, then follow up by doing exactly what Frank asks and keeping him in the loop on all develop-



WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

SOME ADVICE FROM THE HBR.ORG COMMUNITY

TOM SHOULD find a way to creatively meet the boss’s expectations and increase market growth to 15%, if not 18%. That will earn Frank’s respect and allow Tom leverage to do his job his way in the future.

Cynthia M. Powell,
graduate student,
Vanderbilt University

I’VE BEEN a Tom, but I handled it differently. I completely disagreed with my boss, but before any public discussions or actions, I asked to see him in person. He saw me as loyal yet strong enough to face the big bear.

Joel Stock, president
and CEO, Westmont
Corporation

TOM IS doomed and should begin to look for another job immediately. People like Frank run good businesses into the ground because they can’t adapt to change. Frank is too wrapped up in himself to admit he may be wrong.

Stefani Schow,
stay-at-home mother; former publishing supervisor,
Robertson Stephens

THE REAL mistake here is Shannon’s. She should have let Frank interview Tom before he was hired. Then Frank would feel more in charge of Tom and would not have to show him who is boss.

Adam Ibrahim Salem,
corporate director of
finance, B & G for
Hospitality Business

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Paul Falcone is the vice president of human resources at Time Warner Cable. He is the author of *101 Tough Conversations to Have with Employees* (Amacom, 2009).

TOM NEEDS to ask himself what he believes is right and then follow his heart. It doesn't make sense for him to be blindly obedient if he is unshakably convinced that his boss Frank is sending him and the company in the wrong direction. That does not

Trying to pit Shannon and Frank against each other will surely backfire.

mean, however, that his only alternative is to expose Frank's supposed incompetence. Tom has more options than the two he lays out for himself. It's not an either/or proposition.

First, let's look at what isn't an option. No one wants to explain having been fired to a prospective employer, so Tom needs to make every effort to avoid termination. At the top of the list of steps he can take is to abandon the ill-conceived notion of going over Frank's head to Shannon. Her e-mail to Tom reveals why that's a bad idea: "Frank has indicated to me his expectations for your improvement over the next 30 days, after which *he and I* will

TOM CAN'T change his boss; he can only change himself. If Tom wants to succeed in his new job, he needs to forget about what anyone else "should" do and focus on his own actions.

Dorothy Nesbit,
director and leadership coach, Learning for Life

re-evaluate your continued suitability for the position." Shannon is obviously taking up ranks with Frank on this one, and trying to pit them against each other will surely backfire on Tom, especially given Shannon's earlier warning that he would have to manage his relationship with Frank.

There are plenty of Franks out there, and they may get tougher to handle the higher up the ladder Tom goes. As he runs across other bosses with whom he disagrees, he can still identify ways to work effectively with them. If he wants to pursue a corporate career path, Tom will need to find humility within himself as he advocates for his point of view and builds support for it.

It shows a striking lack of business maturity for Tom to assume that he'd outthought Frank, who has 20 years of

Tom may want to leave his job at D7 Displays before he is terminated.

experience, or that he has superior market intelligence because of a few recent conversations with clients. If Tom wishes to stay at D7 Displays, he will need to develop—and then demonstrate—maturity by extending an olive branch to Frank and following his guidelines to a T.

That said, not everyone is cut out for corporate life, and Tom ought to carefully examine his suitability for a career path that often will require putting the needs and preferences of bosses and the organization above his own. If he thinks he will be unable to cultivate the humility, selflessness, and patience that are required for corporate teamwork, he may want to leave his job at D7 Displays before he is terminated. Perhaps he will choose to pursue a more entrepreneurial course that will allow him the space to call his own shots. ♥

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