

Reporting to God

Dealing with personalities on a power trip is a way of life at many firms. Learn how you can cope - and even excel in a challenging climate.



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Many paralegals have worked for a "God" - and not the benevolent, nurturing one. This omnipotent behavior takes many forms.

One attorney would call his legal assistant when his plane landed at the airport during a layover. She was expected to drop everything, jump in her car and deliver documents to him before his next plane departed.

Once, she was delayed because convenient parking was unavailable. She missed the connection.

From that day forward, whenever the call came in, that legal assistant would recruit another firm employee to drive so she could run inside and deliver the paperwork. The attorney wasn't even concerned that either person couldn't complete billable work during these sojourns; they were expected to work late instead.

Is this an abusive relationship? Absolutely not.

However, the attorney demonstrated an extraordinary lack of concern about others and behaved as if the world revolved around him. Some people would say this lawyer suffers from a "God" complex. The worst types think they do no wrong themselves, but constantly judge others. Unfortunately, these personalities are prevalent in the legal profession and present numerous

challenges to those who must work with them.

Reporting this behavior to management rarely results in permanent changes, and switching jobs isn't always an option. Besides, you're likely to find similar characters elsewhere. What's a paralegal to do? First, understand why

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certain people get away with such behavior. Next, learn how to cope and create a workable relationship. Finally, know how to recognize when someone crosses the line into abusive behavior.

The Reason They Get Away with It

There are many reasons people in authority adopt dominating behaviors. In law firms, there's usually one reason they get away with it: The ones who act like "God" are often rainmakers. They are almost always intelligent, top performers, and likely have stellar client relationships. Some are skilled at hiding

and consider such displays a sign of power. Sometimes, even their colleagues are afraid of them. No one wants to jeopardize a relationship with a "deity" for fear of becoming the target of his or her ire. In any case, most "deities" get away with it because they are top billers.

Some blame law schools for planting the seeds that lead to this behavior. Students are berated by professors to toughen them up and develop skills that encourage challenging responses in the face of adversity. Some people

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may be attracted to or encouraged to enter the profession because they have a natural ability to challenge and confront. Their tough facade and ability to silence others with their arguments are valued assets. In the courtroom - or conference room - these talents can be necessary and even appreciated. In the workplace, they're not.

It's also important to note that these people get action as a result of their behavior. Because they're seldom challenged, these patterns are repeated until they become the modus operandi. Bullies obtain the results they want and have little impetus to change.

Change the Rules

No single formula exists to deal with these personalities. Therefore, if one approach doesn't work, try another. You'll probably attempt a variety of techniques before you find the combination that works for you.

One individual covered every time her boss demonstrated his argumentative, controlling behavior. He was intelligent, witty and took pride in crafting sarcastic put-downs. Even when she had relevant contributions, her boss, who also founded the firm, responded with nasty remarks. He seemed to enjoy her discomfort and these exchanges went on for years.

One day, she noticed her boss had an excellent working rapport with his

remarks, the assistant responded in kind. She wasn't nasty - just a bit sassy - and often delivered her retorts with a laugh. He'd respond with a chortle of his own.

Putting her fear aside, this intimidated professional finally summoned the courage to deliver a humorous response to one of his stingers. The man looked at her with surprise, burst into laughter, and the two entered a new phase in their relationship. He was just as challenging to work with, she reported, but she found a way to deal with her fear, and he respected her for it. And while this woman sounds lucky, it actually took years before she was able to attempt this approach. Most of us need more immediate action. The following tips may prove useful to you or someone you know.

Examine the Emotional Role You Play

Wherever a **domineering personality** exists, others play a subservient role. In an office, this naturally occurs because of the division of power. While you may not have the same authority, you don't have to be emotionally weaker than the person who bosses you around. In the case previously mentioned, for example, the employee reclaimed her

Your employer should have a procedure for reporting such mistreatment in the workplace. If someone crosses the line of

power by speaking back. Your perceptions about yourself are communicated through your actions.

Exhibit Confidence

People on power trips prey on your fear of disapproval. Ultimately, this interferes with your own success. To counteract this situation, you must have confidence in your abilities. You don't need the same knowledge as your attorney to excel. Your ability to conduct detailed research, meet difficult deadlines or make clients feel at ease are significant contributions. Take pride in your unique qualities and skills.

Focus on the Assignment Rather Than the Person

Choose to respond rather than react. You can politely walk away from an onslaught without comment and chan

net your energy into work. When you react under duress, you feel stressed and pressured. If you take things personally, you lose perspective and your judgment is impaired.

Ask for Clarification

Difficult personalities often accuse those who support them of producing inferior work. Many attorneys, however, are notoriously vague when supplying directions. Unless you seek clarification regarding the assignment - and feedback once the project is complete - you may not be able to meet their demands. Ask questions and consider documenting your understanding in writing.

Challenge the Power Player

If your typical response is to retreat, consider challenging your opponent. Don't respond emotionally. Point out to them that the behavior in question isn't productive.

With these personalities, it's rarely helpful to explain how you feel, such as, "When you ask me to drop my work and meet you at the airport with little notice, I feel like you don't recognize my contribution to the firm." It would be more effective to explain that the firm loses billable hours during your

absence. Or that you'll be unable to meet other deadlines. If you're challenging someone who engages in angry outbursts, consider telling them -dispassionately - that you're not your most productive in a volatile environment or that it's difficult to determine how to proceed until the two of you can engage in a positive discussion about the assignment.

Listen

Here's surprising news about these personalities: some of them actually feel inadequate. While they may excel in their careers, it's possible their behavior developed because earlier in life someone treated them in a similar fashion. A pattern may be repeated every time you challenge them. Try listening. Really listening. Think beyond the words and demonstrate compassion for

their frustration. Ask how you can help them accomplish a task or assignment. It takes special skills to do this since you may feel under attack, but sometimes, those who prevail can establish more acceptable working relationships.

Ignore or Respond to Put-downs

"You're never going to get anywhere if you don't do what I tell you." Remarks like this destroy confidence and create dependence, and may be indicators of someone who is emotionally abusive. Your reaction, however, can make a difference. If you're able to ignore such remarks, then brush them off. If you decide to respond, you may have to develop a creative approach to gain the response you desire - to disarm or to silence. Don't respond with a put-down yourself. Determine how to convert the put-down into a useful discussion.

For example, when "God" says, "You'll never get anywhere unless you do as I want," you could say, "I am very interested in furthering my career. How do you think I can accomplish that objective?" For more information about bullies in the workplace; check out the [workdoctza.com](http://www.workdoctza.com) Web site.'

Back off

Richard Carlson, Ph.D., author of the bestseller, "Don't Worry, . Make Money," said there are times to simply back off. "In every business there are ... things we can change, that we have some power to control. There are other things that are absolutely beyond our control." His advice is to focus on the things you can change and to let go of the issues you can't.

Don't Submit to Abuse

While "God-like" personalities present challenges, you should never tolerate abusive behavior. Your employer should have a procedure for reporting such mistreatment. If someone crosses the line, don't hesitate to file a complaint.

It can be difficult, however, to determine whether the boundary has been crossed. One question to ask: would this behavior be tolerated by someone in this firm who has no influence? If the answer is no, then take action. If your company doesn't back you up, be prepared to leave.

You shouldn't be expected to tolerate a situation that poses a long-term threat to your emotional well being or supports a dangerous environment.

