

# Can you afford to go above your boss's head?

*Breaking rank or going over the boss's head is a decision not to be taken lightly by an employee, say the experts*

BY EULALIA SNYMAN

American business gurus Jack and Suzy Welch say that going to the boss's boss backfires 80% to 90% of the time, leaving the complainant worse off than before – regardless of whether his or her case had merit.

Wait it out or walk out – but don't simply go over your boss's head, reads their advice to an employee who complained about his manager's incompetence in one of their advice columns.

"Most companies are aware of bad bosses but struggle to get rid of them," they wrote. "Shoving that point in their faces won't make you a hero."

But local recruitment boss Sandra Burmeister believes that working out differences with a boss should be the preferred course of action.

"Even at senior level people don't often break rank," says Burmeister, who is the CEO of Landelahni recruitment group. "Every situation and every individual is so vastly different that you can't use the same approach to solve a situation."

Each scenario needs careful consideration, prompting a multitude of questions, she points out.

"If you believe your boss is unreasonable or incompetent, you need to ask whether you're not being over-sensitive, are there other people who feel the same way, does the boss have a track record of such behaviour; is there actual proof of such incompetence and so on," she says.

"Most companies have formal channels and prefer you follow them – breaking rank is frowned upon, especially in larger organisations."

Most conflict is resolved through informal channels rather than formal channels with Landelahni's candidate base in SA showing that in most cases, people do not break rank but rather leave the company.

The more senior the person, the easier it is to break rank as relationships are more collegial at that level. More junior people, however, often feel victimised and feel they

have no recourse.

Women are also noticeably less inclined to confront conflict situations – particularly in male-dominated industries – with a male boss.

"The perception is that the complainant will be worse off than before, even if this is not the case," explains Burmeister.

"Since getting on with your boss ranks in the top-three reasons for joining and staying with a company, finding yourself working for a boss who is impossible or incompetent usually leads to exit."

According to Burmeister, the traditional structures of large organisations in SA make it difficult to break rank.

In companies with younger bosses, the organisational structures are more informal and communication lines more open, making it easier to access and chat to bosses and bosses' bosses.

"The organisational culture plays a key role," she notes. "Still, making reference to a particular situation is preferable to saying something like 'he is impossible/there is no pleasing her'. Feedback should be specific to an incident and behaviour as this helps to quantify the problem."

Companies prefer that employees exhaust formal channels with no satisfactory outcome before going up the line. This usually includes speaking to the boss in person and documenting the discussion and its outcome in writing.

Burmeister cautions that if your boss is a trusted member of the team and well regarded by the boss, it's likely that complaints about him or her will not be well received.

"Use your judgment to decide on whether to break rank or not," she says. "It may be more useful to exit with your reputation intact."

In extreme cases of wrongdoing such as verbal abuse, sexual harassment and fraudulent activities, the answer is straightforward.

"Then it is definitely OK to break rank. In fact, more than just the boss's boss should be informed."

She believes it is critical for companies to encourage anonymous feedback such as suggestion boxes or hotlines for informants. Companies should also monitor departments and bosses with very high staff turnover as this is usually an indication of a problem.

Professor Willem Landman of the Ethics Institute of SA is in favour of not only providing employees with internal and external means of dealing with differences and wrongdoing, but also of training managers and bosses.

"Managers aren't necessarily born with

leadership qualities and need to be educated too," he says.

According to Landman, many of the complaints whistle-blowing hotlines receive are of an HR nature: people claim they don't receive the respect they deserve and that they are not recognised. Some claim they are not invited or informed about meetings that they are supposed to attend.

"For a company culture to be conducive to a happy and productive workforce, there needs to be appropriate communication channels and procedures," he says.

"A workforce must be able to raise legitimate concerns."

Blowing the whistle on illegal or unethical practices, he emphasises, is any and every employee's duty – lest they be accused of co-participation.

"If your boss's actions are detrimental to you or your company, best international practice dictates that you should have the option to go beyond your line manager to a more senior manager – and that senior manager should assist and protect you against retaliation."

■ *The Ethics Institute of South Africa can be contacted on 011-853-7600 or visit their website at [www.ethicsa.org](http://www.ethicsa.org)*

■ *Landelahni Business Leaders can be contacted on 011-853-7600 or visit their website at [www.landelahni.co.za](http://www.landelahni.co.za)*

## What can you do?

■ Ask advice from a person you can trust, who can speak to the boss, thereby raising the issue informally.

■ Ask a senior mentor for assistance on how to handle the situation. Resolving conflict is key in making it in any organisation.

This could well be a turning point in your career.

■ Approach the person directly and have a discussion if possible.

■ Have an informal discussion with the person's boss if possible, rather than laying a formal grievance.

■ Apply for a transfer to another department if you like the company but not the boss.

When you move, make sure that you have a connection of values with the person you are working with this time.

■ Judge whether you are getting real career growth and opportunities from your current role. If so, it may be worth biting your tongue and staying on until you have reached your personal goal.

■ Speak to a senior HR professional in the company in confidence. There may be similar complaints from other people.



**BLOW THE WHISTLE:** employees who know of wrongdoing in their organisations are obliged to tell the authorities about it.