

FORTUNE
MARCH 2, 1998
BIG AND LITTLE BOSSES
ANNE FISCHER IS ASK ANNIE

Dear Annie: *My boss is obviously disliked and not respected by his boss. The trouble is, his boss is the top guy in our division. This has tremendous impact on the work I produce, since the big boss likes to find fault with everything the little boss and his team touch. This has already affected my pay and my career prospects. Can I get around this? -Goodbye Without Leaving*

Dear GWL: I love this “big boss” and “little boss” stuff—it’s so Laurel and Hardy. But that brand of slapstick was no doubt way before your time, so here’s the new kind: There’s only one boss here, and guess who it is. It’s you.

You can take your talent elsewhere, of course; a different division, a new company. But let’s say you run into the same situation again – you know, if you keep viewing the world in terms of “big” and “little” bosses, you really aren’t going anywhere anyway. Instead, try thinking about what you have accomplished in very specific terms: Whom did it please? (The client, the audience, the tax accountants...) Why was it great? (What did they like about it? If you don’t know, go find out.) How much money did it bring in? (If the answer is a negative number, stop right here.) And then: If I try to sell this someplace else, who will jump at it? Exclude “bosses” from your calculations. At this point, they don’t count.

Nancy Friedberg, a career coach at the Five O’ Clock Club in Manhattan who has heard your story many times, says this: “There are people watching you all the time—people in your business, your peers, your boss’ peers, his boss’ peers, your opposite number at some competing company. You may know who some of these people are right now, or you may not. But figure it out – and once you do, make sure you meet these people. And then don’t talk about the weather.”

Instead, come up with an eight-word summary of your best stuff, your latest triumph, your real interest (okay, the ideal is eight words, but 20 ain’t bad), and get it out there – over lunch, in an elevator, at a conference, in a trade-association meeting. “Once you have built a reputation apart from your company, your company sees you as more valuable,” says Friedberg. “And in fact, you are.”

You won’t need big and little bosses then, will you? One thing does lead to another. Life is so surprising.