

Who's the Boss?

Caught between two supervisors? Here's how to make both of them happy—and fend off a career disaster.

Dan Birkel was in a bind. After a round of reorganizing at the Fuller Brush Co. in Winston-Salem, N.C., the merchandising manager found himself answering to two bosses. One was in charge of the department-store business, the other handled discount chains—and each wanted all of Birkel's time and attention.

Birkel's solution: Ask the two men to come up with one combined to-do list. "I wanted a clear understanding of each job on the list, the timeline and the order of priority," he explains. When one director demanded help on a new project, "I'd point to my list," Birkel says. He'd agree to take on the new task—then ask which item it would replace.

"It drove them crazy," he admits. "But it kept me sane."

Call it the boss trap. Getting caught between two managers can happen at any company and at any level. But it's a particular threat during a tough economy like this: Layoff survivors are often forced to multitask and report to numerous superiors. It can make you feel like you're

the rag doll in a playground tug-of-war—a battle that could have career repercussions for you if you're not able to handle everyone's demands.

"It's pretty much a balance of terror," says Paul Glen, an HR specialist in the tech field, who was once stuck between backbiting partners at a consulting firm. "But if it's a part of your work environment, you have to figure out how to manage it well."

Here's how to perform this delicate juggling act:

Be a diplomat. Don't favor one boss over the other with your time or your friendliness. "You have to wave that Swiss flag and not be political," notes Joyce K. Reynolds, a business coach in Fort Lauderdale, Fla. Get too chummy with one and he might start fishing for information about the other. Keep a polite distance, and pass along only information that's common knowledge. **Reconcile with tact.** Some inefficiency is inevitable when you have two bosses. Birkel, for instance, had to produce the same sales reports two different ways.



But what if you get orders that conflict? In resolving this, choose words that won't stir up a personal battle between bosses. Suggests Reynolds, don't say something incendiary, such as "Bob told me to do it this way; should I do it your way now?" Instead, make the question impersonal: "These had been my directions. How would you suggest I coordinate them with this new information?"

Cover yourself. A big problem with multiple bosses is, they don't always talk to each other. But if work falls through the cracks, guess whom they'll blame? You. So create your own paper trail. One salesman at a Midwest textile maker, for instance, is constantly juggling the needs of the owner and the sales manager, who tend to override each other. "So I just make sure I file all my paperwork," he says. "If a problem ever comes up, I can say I did everything I was supposed to do. I'm not the one who lost this business." **Wait it out.** The good news about boss-versus-boss rivalries is that they tend to resolve themselves. One person wins, and the other moves on. Birkel, who later founded Professionals in Transition, a support group for the unemployed, had to stick it out just six months before one of his bosses at Fuller Brush was reshuffled. "Was it a relief to only have one boss?" Birkel asks aloud. "The answer is yes." —Eileen P. Gunn

SPREADSHEET

WORK IN PROGRESS Inventors are always tinkering with offices to make them more productive. But judging by these new concepts, progress can come at a price. —Anne Kadet

Innovation	Concept	Downside
BlueSpace interactive office system, from IBM and Steelcase	A screen in your cubicle displays the whereabouts of your coworkers.	Everyone knows you made 26 trips to the vending machine in one afternoon.
Meeting Pot, from Future University of Hakodate, Japan	Coffee aroma is transmitted through the office, to let workers know when java's brewing.	Small electrical fire gets mistaken for Brazilian blend.
Desk with inflatable pillow, by German engineer Matthias Knigge	Giant airbag bursts out of desk to aid in napping.	Eliminates need to ever go home and sleep.
Teleportec machine, from Teleportec	High-speed lines transmit life-size, near-holographic images for videoconferencing.	You may <i>look</i> like you're there, but you can't eat the cheese Danish.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GARY POWELL/PHOTONICA, ILLUSTRATION BY ELLIOTT GOLDEN