

Q&A Column

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Email Subject Line: Leaving A Job On Bad Terms: Getting A Good Reference

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Headline : How To Get A Positive Reference When Leaving on Bad Terms

Summary:

Question: If i have had not had a good departure from one of my previous employees, how do I show them as a reference since they will be a part of my work experience?

Diwakar, Toronto, Ontario

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Headline : How To Get A Positive Reference When Leaving on Bad Terms

Dear Mark,

Question: If i have had not had a good departure from one of my previous employers, how do I show them as a reference since they will be a part of my work experience?

Diwakar, Toronto, Ontario

Dear Diwakar,

I was once let go from a job where I actually despised my boss but tried to hide it. He was a perpetual liar, lazy, played favourites, and was having an affair with one of my colleagues who kept getting promoted ahead of me. Yet I urgently needed him as a reference in order to get a new job.

What to do?

Swallow your pride and ask your ex-boss for help. That's how it works, and the sooner you do it, the better off you are – while they're still feeling a little bit guilty for turfing you out.

Here's how I handled it. First I called my ex-boss and explained that, while it was unfortunate that he and I hadn't been able to see eye to eye, there were no hard feelings on my part, and that in moving forward it would be extremely helpful if he could serve as a reference, focusing on the contributions I made while there.

Then I suggested that, since he was such a busy man (cough, cough), why don't I draft a copy of a reference letter that he could look over quickly and, if he approved, could have his secretary type up on company letterhead for me to pick up.

As it turns out he took the bait and agreed. Only in my case he insisted that we “meet for a friendly drink” to talk it over first. While it pained me enormously to do so, I went ahead and met him at the appointed time, with my hand written (in pencil yet, so he’d feel I wasn’t forcing something on him) draft of the reference letter I hoped he’d say yes to.

And he did. Word for word! Which means I got a very solid reference, plus an agreed upon reason for leaving (he consented to say the company was moving in a new direction and was looking for someone with a different skillset—a complete fabrication, but hey, it sounded plausible and got me off the hook).

An easier, more palatable way to approach this is if your former company’s policy is to only acknowledge the dates you worked there and your title. But if this isn’t the case, another tactic is to ask someone else you worked with there to serve as a reference. The problem is if the employer you’re interviewing with wants to hear from your previous boss, you may have to resort to what I’ve described above. If so, take a deep breath, hold your nose, and go for it because you have to.



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