Sick of Covering Up for a Co-Worker

Susan Pinker
Problem Solving Column
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Dear Susan:

I work in a office of cubicles – two metre high walls -- so you often don't know if the person on the other side is at his desk. My neighbour insists on using his speaker phone, even though he is the only one listening and he faces the wall next to me. Thus I hear all his conversations and the replies from the caller. I'm new to this office and it seems that having a speaker phone is a privilege. Any suggestions on how to tell him to tone it down or pick up the handset?

Dilbert

Dear Dilbert:

Your office neighbour will be mortified to learn that you hear every word of his conversations with his mother. If you're new and haven't yet earned your own "blower" he's probably oblivious to your presence.

Open concept offices have a paradoxical effect—the dividers lend the illusion of privacy while broadcasting every sound and smell from within. Ostensibly designed to foster teamwork, while coincidentally keeping overhead down, these cube farms are petri dishes for interpersonal conflict. It should be no surprise that productivity is affected. Conversational noise is the top beef of office workers, 81 percent of whom report that they could get more done if the office were quieter, according to workplace productivity surveys. There is even research evidence from Gary Evans, an expert in environmental stress at Cornell University, that moderate office noise results in elevated levels of epinephrine, a hormone linked to heart disease.

Other than using your Ipod to mask the blabbing, your only option is to let your neighbour know what you know. Next time there's a quiet moment ask him if he's aware that you hear it all, from his social plans to his salary negotiations. Once he knows you have information – not that

you'd use it against him -- he won't object to using a handset or a headset to preserve his privacy and your sanity.

Dear Susan:

My problem is delicate. I am a senior manager being asked by my director to correct the work of a colleague who was recently hired at the same level as me. His work is clearly substandard. After I clean it up, his name stays on the project so it looks like he's performing well. I wouldn't mind coaching a junior employee, but this guy was brought in as a star and was given all the bells and whistles to join the company. Six months in it's clear to me he's a dud. Should I blow the whistle? I resent doing his job along with my own.

The Fixer

Dear Fixer:

Although he kept it quiet for 33 years, resentment was behind Mark Felt's exposure of Richard Nixon at Watergate. It played a plum role in whistle-blower Nancy Olivieri's corrosive legal battles with the drug company that sponsored her research and the university that employed her. Dismiss it as sour grapes, but there is nothing like resentment when it comes to blistering reputations or bringing down people in power. So I learned from two tell-all books about whistle-blowers that came out this summer: The Secret Man, by Bob Woodword, and The Drug Trial, by Miriam Shuchman. Both are morality tales with baroque subplots, but there's no ignoring their primary message to those pulling the strings: ignore resentment and it just might blow up in your face.

But if you acknowledge your well-deserved feelings of resentment in a tete-a-tete with your director, you won't have to blow a gasket or blow the whistle. The director already knows the star's weaknesses well enough to have asked you to prop him up; it's no secret between you two. But he should make your new role clear to you and to upper management.

Instead of calling it whistle-blowing – and being excoriated for your troubles – frame your Mr. Fix-It role as an essential service that requires tacit recognition. In the privacy of his office or a lunch outside, remind your director quietly of the projects you've resuscitated. Tell him you're honoured he thinks your skills robust enough to fill in the gaps, then segue

to the need for more staff and better compensation to be able to carry on with both responsibilities: yours and the star's.

It's a popular gambit, but when companies poach stars from outside the organization they court two big risks: alienating existing talent who may compete with and undermine the star, and pulling the rug out from under the wunderkind, the one that fostered his or her initial successes. One would think that high performing stock analysts would take their smarts with them when they migrate between firms, but a study that followed the performance of 1052 star analysts showed that 46 percent did poorly the year after they moved companies and 20 percent had not regained their stride five years later. Why? The environment that originally nurtured them also underpins their successes, according to the authors of the study, Harvard Business School professors Boris Groysberg, Ashish Nanda and Nitin Nohria, who found that stars' achievements don't transfer well. "When a star joins a department very often the performance of the other people declines, because a lot of attention and resources go to the star," says Prof. Nanda, who suggests that organizations that recruit stars must also know how to integrate them, discipline them and part with them if necessary.

But the companies do best of all when they grow and groom their talent from within. That's where you come in. If your boss expects you to shore up the star while maintaining your productivity, he should make this explicit. Give him an opening by signalling your contributions so you get the support and recognition you need. Otherwise your resentment will eat you alive. And your director will have a star who destroys everyone around him. Professor Nanda has a name for that. It's called a death star.

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