

Mediator Can Reframe Issue

Dear Susan:

I'm a programmer. I work in a big organization with a multicultural workforce. Recently a colleague has been getting on my nerves because he is taking on other peoples' assignments. He discusses the project descriptions with another project-mate in a different language and although I asked them not to do this, they persist. Now they have assigned small odd jobs to me not related to my skill set. I tried discussing this matter with my manager (who also happens to be someone I know from college in my country). He inquired about this with my project leader, which has made the situation worse. Now the project is going on without me. This colleague gets worried when I meet with the director, then cross-examines me about why the meeting took place and what happened there. He is fine otherwise. He happens to be my roommate too, and my cabin-mate at work. It is getting difficult for me to handle this issue, especially since he did this to another colleague and that guy got fired for not doing enough work. Please suggest how to handle the situation.

Doing the Joe Jobs

Dear Joe Jobs:

Your project-mate shares your cubicle at work-- and presumably your fridge and bathtub at home -- yet steals your assignments and freezes you out of work-related discussions by literally speaking a language you don't understand. A former college classmate shares your background and is your manager, yet is unable to advocate for you or keep the staff in line so they don't blackball each other or mutiny. There are so many overlapping and competing circles in your personal and work Venn diagram that if you were not a programmer, I would have assumed you were in Tony Soprano's family business.

The similarity, of course, is that there is dramatic jostling for power at work, juxtaposed with a veneer of civility on the domestic scene. Your comment that your colleague and roommate is "is fine otherwise" floored me because you seem to have compartmentalized the office conflict so completely that you are unable to view the person siphoning off your livelihood as the same guy who monopolizes your TV remote. Do the two of you talk to each other at all? Because talk you must if you want to stay in this job.

But don't panic. I'm not suggesting that you resolve this on your own. If yours is indeed a large organization, then there are people whose job it is -- officially or not -- to help you navigate problems like these. It could be a human resources professional, a sympathetic manager, the office ombudsman or a co-worker on the team. The prerequisite is that this person be a good communicator, someone who can help you express your concerns effectively and who can translate the perspective of others for you at the same time. Peter Frost, a professor of organizational behaviour at the University

of British Columbia calls this person a “toxin handler,” but I would just call her a mediator.

Once you have scoped out who fulfills this role, brief him or her privately about your concern that you are not contributing as much time and expertise as you expected when the project began. Make it clear that you are keen to apply your skills to make the project a success, and if that is now impossible on this project, then you would like the opportunity to work on another. Then arrange a meeting with your co-worker, manager and director and use the mediator as moral support and interpreter when you voice your concerns and listen to the others. The mediator is not there to speak for you or bear tales about your conniving co-worker, but to give you the confidence to assert yourself, something you seem to have had difficulty with in the past. He or she can also reframe prickly issues (such as your worries about your position’s longevity) in ways that are less threatening to others on the team.

Your workplace may be multicultural, but it also has its own unique culture. Research on workplace diversity over the last three years reveals that it’s the precisely the corporate culture that determines whether multiculturalism at work makes gains from group members’ strengths, or simply splinters it into factions. Workplaces that encourage people to talk, hear different points of view and struggle through “tension-filled discussions” succeed in their mission to benefit from a diverse staff, according to recent articles by Jeffry Polzer, David Thomas and Robin Ely. When real differences, conflicts and diverging points of view are talked about and not hidden under a rock, that’s when momentum increases at the office. But when conflict is swept under the rug – well you might as well just go home now and watch the Sopranos on TV.

Feedback:

Dear Susan,

Regarding your letter last week (Dear Resentful, June 25, 2003), I could not disagree more with your advice to the resentful school teacher who planned to leave early from work to catch a plane. This teacher made plans, imposing on her co-workers to complete the balance of the day’s duties, without clearing it with the supervisor first. The teacher then resents the fact that the supervisor, some other time, left work early for an undisclosed reason, calling it a double standard.

A conscientious and honest teacher would not book a plane at a time that took her away from work duties and impose them on co-workers. The teacher should not insubordinately determine the supervisor has double standards. That supervisor just may instead have high standards.

You missed an opportunity to tell the teacher that work comes first and looking around for someone to blame when in fact the teacher is shirking the responsibilities is a bad example to the students and co-workers. It likely breeds a bad working environment and creates low morale.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.

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