

Tips Help you Cope with Disruptive Co-Workers

By Sandy Shore | Tuesday, January 19, 2010

It's the chitchat that never seems to end. Or the humming or whistling while you're trying to concentrate. Or the smell of someone's lunch (what IS she eating???), or even a whiff of body odor.

The most irritating or disruptive things about a job may have nothing to do with too much work or boring assignments. Sometimes what gets your goat is the annoying habits of the person at the next desk or cubicle.

What do you do? Put up with it? Complain to your co-worker and maybe start a rift? Complain to the boss and possibly make everything worse?

Management consultants say you should address such issues if they could end up affecting how well you do your job. So, here are some tips about the best way to deal with disruptive co-workers:

ANNOYANCE OR INTERFERENCE?

The first step is to figure out whether your co-worker's behavior is just annoying or if it really does interfere with your ability to do your job. You also need to ask yourself, is it really your colleague causing the problem, or is it your attitude?

Some people may be more sensitive or intolerant if they are unhappy in their jobs, under a lot of stress or dealing with personal issues. They may be more prone to find something wrong with a co-worker's behavior, said Roxanne Emmerich, a workplace management expert who runs The Emmerich Group Inc. in Minneapolis.

"If there is no work problem, then you really need to ask yourself, is this something that I just need to let go," said Atlanta workplace management coach Marie McIntyre, who runs the web site youofficecoach.com.

QUIET, PLEASE

Some people need quiet to concentrate while others embrace noise or talking as part of the creative process.

McIntyre said there are physiological differences among people that allow some to screen out co-workers' conversations and other noise. Others, however, hear and notice everything.

"If you're somebody who hears every single background noise, then you probably need to take some steps in your own workspace to counter that," she said.

If you're distracted by a noisy nearby co-worker, consider using headphones, earplugs or a white noise machine that can mask some sounds. When you need to get a project completed, ask to use an empty conference room or office when you need to get a project completed.

You might also ask your boss if you can move to a different desk. Some managers rearrange desks to cluster employees who need quiet in one area and those who aren't bothered by noise in another. The goal is to make it more comfortable for employees and improve productivity.

Emmerich once had an employee who was likable, kind and conscientious but "incapable of using her inside voice."

When it became difficult for employees around the woman to get their work done, Emmerich moved her to a back corner of the office. Problem solved.

Also ask to move if your problem isn't just your neighbor, but the fact that you're located in a spot where people tend to congregate, such as an intersection of paths among cubicles or outside the boss' door.

THE CONVERSATION

When those steps don't work, it's time for a conversation with your co-worker. Often, colleagues don't realize they are creating problems and are willing to make changes, the experts say.

Explain to your colleague that his or her behavior is interfering with your ability to do your job. Offer an alternative or work out a compromise, Emmerich said. For example, if your co-worker uses a speakerphone and the noise distracts you, ask your colleague to use a headset or a speakerphone in a conference room instead.

The chat doesn't have to be uncomfortable. Make it about work, not personal issues, and frame comments by using "I" instead of "you" to avoid criticizing or offending your co-worker, McIntyre said.

It's also a good idea to think about what you're going to say ahead of time so you will be better prepared.

Katie Weaver, a receptionist and secretary at The First Citizens National Bank in Upper Sandusky, Ohio, said co-workers used to stop by her desk in the lobby to talk about families, their weekend - just about anything.

With 10 phone lines to answer and customers to greet, Weaver said the chats interfered with her work but she was reluctant to say anything because she didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings.

She solved the problem by using Emmerich's suggestions. She explained to her co-workers that she loved to hear their news but it was stopping her from doing her job. She asked if they could catch up on a lunch break or after hours.

Weaver said her co-workers were understanding.

"You can do it in a fun way and get the point across," she said.

THE TABOO TOPICS

Sometimes the problem is very personal, and therefore a sensitive matter, such as your co-worker's chronic cough. Or, his or her very pungent body odor.

The management pros say there's not much you can do when it's a health problem such as coughing, sneezing or throat clearing. In such cases, a white noise machine may help.

If the issue is body odor, you need to be extremely tactful - remember that most people don't know that they're offending others, and are likely to be shocked and embarrassed when you deliver the news. Management consultants suggest asking your co-worker if you could discuss something that you realize may be difficult to hear. And then explain that you have noticed an odor that is distracting to you and perhaps others.

This technique also could work for co-workers who use too much perfume or cologne.

WHEN TO GO TO THE BOSS

If the irritating or disruptive behavior persists after your conversation or the issue is particularly sensitive, you may want to ask the boss for help. Explain that you aren't comfortable talking directly to your colleague because you tried and failed or because it is a sensitive issue.

Keep the conversation focused on work, and explain that you're trying to get your job done as well as you can. Steer clear of any personality issues.

And if other co-workers have similar complaints, ask them to join you when you meet with your supervisor. That can help a manager understand that the issue isn't the result of a conflict between two employees.