

Dividers that divide

Reader A.D. writes that, due to a problem with office chatter, dividers were ordered for her office.

However, they were set up incorrectly, separating her but not the talkers. Her supervisor agreed the dividers were in the wrong place but isn't getting around to fixing the problem. "I am a senior person and well respected so I am trying to cooperate and not rock the boat. (But) as it is now I have to get up and squeeze between the two girls and excuse myself as they are chatting... Can you help?"

Dear A.D.,

I hear a person who feels all alone without a sense of control – and an increasing sense of isolation. I think this is the root of your problem.

There are certain factors that make workplaces great and certain factors that make workplaces terrible. In our book, *Hiring, Managing and Keeping the Best*, Monica Beauregard, a Toronto HR consultant, and I identified six things that make a workplace rewarding to work in. They are: a well-defined culture with leadership and direction; employee ownership, decision making and flexibility; a motivating, supportive and trusting environment; a healthy, safe and comfortable workplace; work- and personal-life balance; and regular and open communication.

Your workplace is lacking in several areas, but two are critical: employee ownership and decision making, and a motivating, supportive and trusting environment.

If you do not feel that what you say has an impact, you will even-

ASK AN EXPERT

tually feel less in control. This can lead to all sorts of problems. You may be less motivated to work hard and less inclined to make improvements that could benefit the company. It can also reduce your self confidence and sense of power.

Professor Martin Seligman has done extensive studies on *learned helplessness*. He found that when people are repeatedly told they cannot do something they eventually stop trying.

In your situation, a supportive and trusting environment would be one in which you feel reasonably secure in your job and generally supported. You would feel comfortable speaking openly to your coworkers and your manager about the situation and what a solution might look like.

Having said this, your particular situation is not so easy to shift overnight. Your desire to not *rock the boat* suggests that your coworkers see you as someone who is easy to get along with – amiable is the word that comes to mind. If, all of a sudden, you decide to be more assertive, others will wonder what is wrong or may simply ignore you. Also, if you make any sort of demand or threat (or, in this case, even a simple request to the manager to solve the problem), it usually backfires.

Also, your workplace culture seems to be fairly cliquish; everyone is expected to get along, no complainers allowed. Those who speak up might be perceived as being difficult and might suffer even more isolation.

Therefore, the best tactic, and one that likely feels comfortable to you, would be a long-term campaign to get your needs met and your sense of control back. In essence that means slowly standing up for yourself in a kind but more direct way.

Do not use e-mail, ever, to deal with any misunderstandings. On a piece of paper write the words: *facts, impacts and needs*. Write down the specific events that occurred and then write down how they impacted you. Then write down how your needs were not met.

For example, *Fact: My boss e-mailed me and said _____. Impact: It made me feel ignored. Need: I need to feel listened to.*

After writing these down, write out a full script in the same format: *facts, impacts and needs*, including what you would say to the people involved if you chose to. Then put everything in your desk for a few days. Do not ever send it. Once you are clear about these you will be able to have a calm conversation with your boss.

It is important for all of us to understand our own needs and be able to communicate these to others. Otherwise the likelihood of those needs being met goes down. Good luck. **AAU**

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