

TOO NICE FOR YOUR OWN GOOD

Susan Pinker

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Dear Susan:

My colleagues complain that I am too nice, with them and with clients. I like to appease everyone and don't like to offend. As you know, sometimes one has to be firm and straight with people. I find it too difficult and challenging to approach someone and tell him that I did not like what he did, or that what he said about me is not true and I would like it to stop. Are there books that help people to stand up and confront people? What does it take to be strong in the area of confrontation?

Nice but not Easy

Dear Nice:

It takes a little nerve, training, feedback and lots of practice. It's no different than learning any complex new skill in which anxiety interferes with mastery. Scaling heights and public speaking come to mind as the usual fears, but anxiety can be triggered by anything from big dogs, to stage performance or flip turns in the pool, my own Achilles' heel.

In your case, interpersonal conflict touches off a classic fight or flight response -- your body senses that standing up for yourself is dangerous, so it jump-starts all the physiological responses to a real physical threat, like ramping up your heart rate and tensing your muscles, preparing you for a quick get-away. Anxiety is uncomfortable, to say the least, and your first impulse is to avoid the situation that provoked it. Sidestepping conflict reduces your anxiety -- which is its own immediate reward. But avoiding the situation also eliminates any opportunity to try on a new solution. This is how you get stuck always being the nice guy when sometimes you don't feel nice at all.

Even if niceness is hardly a psychological disorder, a cognitive behaviour therapist or assertiveness training coach can help you learn to quell your anxiety and tailor your responses to a particular situation, especially when facing your detractors (an employee assistance program or

provincial psychological association can make a referral). Part of your exercise with a psychologist or coach will be coming up with fact-based, non-confrontational scripts that you can rehearse beforehand and use in a typical conflict situation, so you don't just withdraw any time you're challenged.

Books like *When You Say Yes But Mean No*, by Leslie Perlow, and *Turning Conflict into Profit*, by Larry Axelrod and Roy Johnson, suggest ways to face organizational conflict without escalating it. *Your Perfect Right*, by Robert E. Alberti and Michael Emmons, and *The Assertiveness Handbook*, by Randy J. Paterson define assertiveness and offer hands-on advice. The shelves groan with other self-help books, but ultimately it's hard to change emotion-laden human interactions all alone at home, turning pages. You need practice. You need feedback. And you need just a bit of nerve to try something different where people think they already know everything about you.

Dear Susan,

I believe it was Confucius who said "If you love your job, you will never have worked a day in your life." I have that kind of a job. But little by little, two superiors are destroying that great feeling. I work for a small company whose owner leaves the day-to-day management to two people who oversee everything, from ordering staples to tax reporting. There is no problem with my work per se. I meet my deadlines and am very careful to meet all the necessary requirements. I also ask for extra work because I simply love what I do.

In the beginning, I couldn't wait to get to work, I was that happy. But then, strange things started happening. Suddenly, I was told I was loud, laughed too much and that other employees found it disruptive, mysterious employees who remained nameless. Then, I was accused of going to the bathroom just to chat and not picking up my mail and newspapers fast enough. These complaints increase close to salary reviews, at which point I'm subjected to accusations with no supporting arguments offered and no defense possible. When I counter with concrete evidence, accusations are abandoned as if nothing was said. But bad feelings remain. There is no human resource department, so I cannot ask for help within the company. Apparently my actual performance matters next to nothing. I've tried talking to these two managers to no avail. My husband is tired of listening to my problems and advises me to look for another job. Is there any other recourse you could suggest?

Sad but True

Dear Sad:

You can make one last ditch effort to come to an understanding with these supervisors but I'm not optimistic. When a boss's supervision translates as a lack of trust, an employee's motivation and performance plummets, research shows. In 2004, Armin Falk, a professor at the University of Bonn and research director at the Institute for the Study of Labour and Professor Michael Kosfeld from the University of Zurich studied how much Swiss students would invest in a job under two different conditions: when a boss demanded a minimum, supervised workload, versus when an employer gave them free rein to invest as much as they wanted in the job. When there was a specified minimum, more than half the students gave only this amount. But when they were trusted to invest as much as they wanted, the amount was a third higher. Prof. Falk interpreted the study's results as evidence for self-fulfilling prophecies. "Anyone who is suspicious of the willingness to work of their employees is in fact punished by poor work levels; whoever is optimistic and gives them free rein is rewarded," he said.

You may think your performance hasn't suffered due to this overbearing supervision and apparent distrust, but your morale certainly has. So will your productivity. If you love your work, just imagine how much you would invest in it if you were a valued and trusted employee? As a last resort, try marshalling the support of your co-workers to see if they are being treated to this degree of surveillance. If it's universal there's strength in numbers when approaching the owner of the company to discuss possible solutions. If you're being singled out for this unwholesome scrutiny, I'm with your husband. Run, don't walk, to another job where your gusto for your work will be to everyone's advantage.

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