

DILEMMAS

Female aggression can be deep-seated, tricky to deal with



SUSAN PINKER PROBLEM SOLVING

Dear Susan,

A co-worker has been very aggressive lately. She does not deal with comments or arguments well, and even threw a drawer into my cubicle and ran out cursing after I disagreed with her. When asked about this, she claimed it was because of high blood sugar and she did not apologize. I am not alone: She has attacked co-workers when they have disagreed with her. I am fearful of more violent outbreaks. Now that I have to work with her, I am having trouble expressing myself, and have become defensive and aggressive in my own way; this person is more senior than I am and often belittles my ideas, saying that I do not respect experience. I also believe she is resentful that I have been given opportunities here and that management has recognized my ideas. I end up taking a lot of this frustration home. But as a team player, I want to learn how to improve the situation.

--Nervous Younger Sister

Dear Nervous,

A spate of recent books, such as *Mean Girls Grown Up* by Cheryl Dellasega and *Tripping the Prom Queen* by Susan Shapiro Barash, suggest that this kind of bullying is a trend. But relational aggression between women has a long pedigree and often surfaces when resources are scarce.

Sarah Hrdy, an anthropologist who studied relationships between primates

in the 1980s, was one of the first scientists to show that females rarely fight: They compete with each other via harassment. Some high-ranking female primates bother subordinates so much that the stress undermines the underlings' ability to conceive and raise healthy offspring -- the ultimate evolutionary putdown.

Anyone who's ever interacted with a two-year-old knows that there's no negotiating with someone who throws things. You have to pull rank. Although you're junior, this means biting the bullet and invoking whatever policies and procedures that exist regarding harassment and workplace violence. Throwing drawers and cursing, in the very least, shows a lack of professionalism, wouldn't you say?

Any organization that ignores these breaches of civility is playing with fire: Just think of the news coverage and lawsuits that might arise from employees who have been targets of flying Rolodexes.

"When aggression occurs in the workplace, it will reoccur and increase in intensity [if left unchecked]," says Frema Engel, an expert in workplace violence. "This is not an isolated incident. You have to immediately name the behaviour, say it's completely unacceptable. Say: 'I won't tolerate this and will take further action if it happens again.'"

I'd waste no time in documenting events, including dates and every observable detail, so that you can report it accurately to HR, the next level of management, or both. Ask what their response will be. If you work in a cubicle, surely others have seen or heard her lose control -- they also should keep notes.

In the meantime, use polite, neutral language that frames the discussion ("I

see you disagree with me on the details but are fine with the principle") and sets limits on bullying ("I won't discuss this with you while you're so angry. I'll try later").

Avoid replying in kind so as not to escalate the aggression. Ms. Dellasega, a professor at the Penn State College of Medicine whose book *Mean Girls* documents many nasty tales such as yours, says this co-worker feels threatened and probably has no idea she's perceived as hostile. But as her verbal response to the flying drawer was a non sequitur, it doesn't sound like she's open to touchy-feely feedback from you.

Finding another job at the organization might be a better ticket; this may be the time to move on before your mental health takes a further hit. You may be a team player, but that doesn't mean you should accept being browbeaten. This woman needs assistance. You are not the one to provide it. Make sure this problem is recognized and if it's not addressed, talk with your feet.

Dear Susan,

For a year and a half, I have been dealing with an ethics issue with the international company that employs me. I was able to make some minor headway on the issue through my union. However, I took the issue further with the ethics committee, which has for the most part ignored my information, and I also went as far as the company's president and the board of directors. In one of your columns, you indicated that ethics committees often have their own watchdogs at arm's length. How would an employee find out who this is?

--Persistent

Dear Persistent,,

Depending on the ethics breach and the size and type of the company, it could fall under the gaze of a trade association watchdog (for a bank or manufacturer, say), government legislation (if dealing with privacy, pollution or human rights violations), or, if it's a large company trading on U.S. stock markets, even the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, says Len Brooks, executive director of the Clarkson Centre for Business Ethics and Board Effectiveness at the University of Toronto's Rotman School. Mr. Brooks says that SOX, as it's called, governs

250 of Canada's largest companies and has a condition that accounting irregularities must be reported to both CEO and members of the board " 'And' is the operative word here," he says, just in case the senior officer is motivated to keep the matter under wraps.

Canadian regulators have implemented a number of rules that guide the conduct of executives along the lines of SOX. As well, whistleblower programs are becoming more common here and should spell out who to contact.

But before you take the next step, I'd consult a lawyer to make sure your point won't be considered frivolous or libellous. Never giving up can be a positive trait -- think Lance Armstrong, Madonna or Jane Fonda in The China Syndrome.

But people who won't take no for an answer can also be framed as kooks or scapegoats. Having your own legal watchdog means that at least you can choose between the two.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.
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