



PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS: CREDIT WHERE CREDIT IS DUE

A bug's life in a dog-eat-dog world

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Dear Susan,

I am an experienced professional who works with various small teams. I was recently asked by a senior colleague to research a question for a major client. I responded the following week with a detailed written report that was well-received. The document was circulated internally before being sent to the client and, when the final version went out, I was surprised to see that my senior colleague had made a couple of minor changes and then had signed his name to it. I feel that he took credit for my work, and this is unfair. What should I do?

- *Out of the Picture*



Dear Out,

In Bert Hölldobler and E.O Wilson's magnificent new book, *The Superorganism*, members of successful societies have specific roles - as reproducers, providers or workers, say - and any conflict between individuals disappears under the pressure to make the group as efficient as possible when competing with other groups.

True, the authors were writing about ants and termites, not about licensed professionals. But the loose analogy holds.

For a species to dominate its environment, the individual disappears. So, for the swarm-raider army ants of Central and Southern America, once a prey is subdued, the worker ants climb all over it while one "major" stands guard. Once he's on duty (yes, it's a "he" but the supreme ruler is a "she"), tasks are then delegated.

"Because exceptionally large objects can be moved only by strong workers, the first member of the gang is usually a sub-major," they write. "After this heavy lifter has moved into position, smaller ... workers join in until the prey is moving expeditiously homeward."

They add that these ant teams are "super-efficient" - because they carry prey so large that, had it been cut into little pieces, individual group members wouldn't be able to move the individual bits. They

work as a unit or they don't get the prize.

All this to say that while you and your colleague may be the worker ants and your client the prey (to follow the rough analogy), your senior partner might have taken credit because he saw himself as

the "major" standing guard on this important file. That's the practice among raider ants and it may well be the practice in your firm.

There could be other reasons why he signed his name to the report that have little to do with you, but may still be legitimate. Your report might be part of a much bigger deal or the company might want just one client contact on the file.

Whatever the reasons, it behooves you to imagine why the senior colleague signed his name before you ask him why he did it.

"There are always good reasons," says Deborah Kolb, the Deloitte Ellen Gabriel professor for women and leadership at the Simmons School of Management in Boston and an expert in negotiation.

Though many team players feel invisible and that others take credit for their work - with reason - the place to start is not with your sense of injury, which will put your colleague on the defensive, but rather with what you imagine might be his or her rationale for having signed the report, she says.

That's how you get the conversation going. "You want to keep a space for their viewpoint, for their story." Only when you lend your colleague's viewpoint some legitimacy can you ask for what you want.

And there's the rub. What do you want? Visibility within the firm? Praise for a job well done? A part to play in client meetings?

Once you leave space for the other person's perspective, you can request what you think is missing.

"The senior colleague knows you did the work," and your career rests on this kind of knowledge, Dr. Kolb says.

Still, no matter how successful the group is, you as an individual might still need some recognition - a little reassurance that even if you're living in a dog-eat-dog world, you're not leading just a bug's life after all.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

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