

WOMEN'S BUSINESS

C I N C I N N A T I

Neither tolerate nor emulate others' controlling behavior

Last month's column offered tips for aggressive women who need to tone down their menacing behaviors. If you work with one of these controlling women, you may have discreetly placed a copy of the article on her desk or dropped hints about behavior-modification workshops. As the resident witch, she is costing the company business and creating a hostile work environment. If her aggression has not abated, it's time to



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shift the focus to how *you* feel and respond to her behaviors.

Faced with aggression, first stop and consider your feelings. It is possible that this woman reminds you of someone or behaves in a way that triggers memories of past emotional abuse? Once you are sure you are responding to *her* actions, then you can approach change with more confidence. The following guidelines may be helpful:

◆ **Remind yourself of your worth.** You have a legitimate right to be treated humanely and professionally. You are not required to absorb the blows of a crazed colleague nor should you believe you are the problem. No matter how smart she is, a woman who relates to others in a controlling, bullying way is flat-out wrong. By the same token, don't diminish your integrity by modeling her behavior.

◆ **Focus on the behavior.** As much as you dislike her personality or attitude, you can only address her actions. Try to make concrete, specific comments about particular behaviors that you wish to see changed. Describe how her behavior impacts your ability to do your job and suggest alternatives for her words or actions. For example, you might tell her that constant interruptions during team meetings make it difficult for the group to stick to the agenda.

◆ **Choose your moment.** Timing is so much in life, especially when dealing with an aggressive colleague. If you are exhausted and frazzled, you may not have the emotional capacity to begin the conversation. Location is also important. If

a woman has been yelling and pounding on a conference room table, you might wait until she is in her office to talk to her about her actions. You cannot confront too many aggressive people at once, especially if you are dealing with an aggressive family member. Try to resolve personal issues before "taking on" your demanding colleague.

What matters is that you begin to experience a series of small successes toward defending yourself.

◆ **Walk away.** When tempers are frayed or your aggressive colleague has behaved in a way that makes you so angry you cannot speak, don't. Call a time out and compose your thoughts. This may also give her an opportunity to calm down enough to listen to your feedback. Shortly after the upsetting exchange, go to her and explain how you feel. She may be more willing to change if she feels that you are making an effort to meet her halfway. Aggressive people need to feel they are in control — give her enough room to save face without violating your rights in the process.

◆ **Practice being a broken record.** If your co-worker is used to getting her way through force or threats, she will probably dismiss your comments initially. Begin to systematically say the exact same thing, over and over. Counter each demanding comment of hers with a simple, clear, assertive message, even if it feels awkward. You might ask a friend to allow you to practice "saying no" until you perfect your message. Try to jot down short responses and speak them out loud until they feel natural. This technique works surprisingly well over time.

Despite using these strategies, you still may not get the results you would like from her. What you will gain, however, is self-respect and a realistic "read" on whether or not your aggressive colleague can improve. Women are under no obligation to tolerate inappropriate, aggressive behavior from other women — we are all diminished when this behavior occurs. Civility rocks.

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