



# Project Pointers

**Issue 12**

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*By Marta A. Brockmeyer, Ph.D.*

Recent issues of Project Pointers have addressed project communication. In some universal reflection of this topic, I've been receiving an unusually large number of calls from colleagues who are dealing with employee conflicts. In all cases, communication and "being right" rest at the heart of the problem. Personality disputes, work style clashes, mean spirited attacks—you name it. While I've helped in a variety of situations, achieving marked results in just a few weeks, I do have a collective sense of too many good people being worn out from these conflicts.

I'm enclosing two articles related to aggressive behavior in the workplace. While they are written for a female audience, most of the issues also swirl around the heads and desks of male employees. I hope you find these to be helpful. I also am available for organizational situations that require more than reading—and please feel free to call if you'd like to talk.

At the other end of the spectrum, I'm hearing from committed nonprofit professionals who feel unable to voice their opinions or ideas because of intolerant colleagues or bosses. As we all maneuver through a society that is deeply divided by political and personal beliefs, I offer a gentle reminder that we must focus on the work and needs of those whom we serve and try to move beyond ourselves.

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Best wishes,

# WOMEN'S BUSINESS

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 C I N C I N N A T I
 

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## When push comes to shove, you may hurt your business



**Marta Brockmeyer**

You know her: The woman who wears high heels so she can stand taller and look down on the staff in a menacing manner. The woman who violates personal space. The woman who talks nonstop or with a tone that brooks no difference of opinion.

Sarcastic or deadly quiet, she controls the room and sucks the life out of everyone around her.

She also is losing business.

Recognize her? Possibly recognize yourself?

The goal of professional communication is assertiveness, not aggressiveness. Assertive behavior means speaking up for yourself without diminishing someone else's rights.

When you are aggressive, you express yourself at the expense of others. You diminish someone else's rights by behaving in a selfish or controlling manner.

If you are a woman who has moved down the assertiveness continuum toward being a world-class witch, it's time to take a step back. How likely are you to get what you want if people run from the room or get out the garlic pouches?

What kicks you into overdrive? Two aspects of your background mold your daily work habits — your belief systems and gender. What did you learn as a child? Perhaps it was easier to get what you wanted from mom if you threw a fit and bullied your siblings. Or perhaps as a girl, you were raised to serve others and be nice, so you are trying to systematically wipe out all of these tendencies.

Consciously or not, you have made a decision that being aggressive is the only way to get what you want. Nonsense! Here are some tips for adopting a more appropriate — and effective — style:

- ◆ **Back off.** This is not rugby. Try to be conscious of your physical demeanor and how you may be affecting others. Step back a little if you have any doubts about someone's comfort zone and personal space. When possible, sit down so you are at eye level, not looking down at them. Try to monitor your gestures and don't roll your eyes.

- ◆ **Practice appropriate messages.** Before launching into a long tirade, think about what you

### Part II

If you're not a witch but you have to work with one, Brockmeyer will offer survival tips in Part II, coming in August's *Women's Business Cincinnati*.

really want. What exactly is the heart of your request or statement? Try to get it down to five words and hold that in your mind before you speak. Be specific and clear when you begin to talk, then own your message and take responsibility if someone does not understand. Ask for feedback if you have any questions about the exchange. For example, you might say, "I'd just like to be sure that my directions made sense." This gives the other person a graceful way to ask for clarification.

- ◆ **Just don't do it.** Think honesty is always the best policy? Depends on how it is delivered. If you have learned that expressing every thought that flies through your head is your personal right and expect the world to openly embrace all of your gems of wisdom, get ready for some heartache. Choose your moments. More importantly, choose your words and actions. Use simple, neutral words that neither blame nor belittle. Expressing anger can be constructive but should not be used as a weapon.

- ◆ **Ask for help.** Changing behavior takes much practice, and it can be lonely. In some cases, your attempts to change may be met with suspicion or resistance. So it may be more effective to enlist the help of a friend or colleague who can give you feedback. Or, you might want to use the services of a professional coach who specializes in this type of work. These communication issues may be so deeply rooted and emotionally loaded that a therapist is the best source of guidance.

Do you think you might be too aggressive? Time to shoot for new "A" words like assertive, appropriate and anchored. Please.

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# WOMEN'S BUSINESS

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C I N C I N N A T I

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## 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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