

REAL LIFE SOLUTIONS

JUNE 2010

Are Co-workers Overloading You With **Personal Problems?**

Do some co-workers confuse you with an emotional dumping ground? Keep in mind that your own friendly body language and over-listening can contribute to the problem. Resolve to be supportive of individuals, however, remain firm about how much personal chat you are willing to hear.

Basic facts

- Listening too much hurts your image. If the office whiner stops to chat at your workstation, you will soon be perceived as wasting company time.
- You can never fix another person's problems. Besides, if you dish advice too freely, your over-involvement can hurt. Someone who finds comfort in unloading on you can postpone finding real solutions.
- Occasionally allow others to vent. If you never listen to anyone's gripes and groans, you'll find it tough to gain true support when you need to vent.

Know your limits

- Remember that if someone vents once on a subject, that's OK. Getting on a soapbox more than once is unfair to you.
- Steer the conversation by showing your listener that you lean toward logic. Re-

fuse to get caught up in emotional spiels. Do this by asking thoughtful questions, e.g., "How do you think you will address this situation?"

- Notice if your co-worker starts to think logically—opening the door for solutions. If you still hear venting only, say, "Can we talk about this later? I must get back to work."

Two types to always avoid

- Habitual whiners chew on the same problems for months or years. They thrive on the concern they stir up in you.
- Drama queens or kings use emotional conversation to stir up their own hormones. These types have a brand new crisis almost every day.
- Ward off whiners and dramatists by refusing to act as their audience. Avoid direct eye contact, and try to never extend the conversation in any way.

Steer a co-worker to real solutions

If you know of a resource for someone—such as a support group—mention it, provided this person is really seeking answers. Encourage anyone to find help for complex issues by saying, "This problem is too large for you to manage alone." Depending on the situation, you might offer to help find key contacts.

Verbalize personal boundaries

If you do need to address a co-worker who's driving you up the wall, resolve to verbalize clear-cut boundaries—even if others

won't support your choice to speak up. If a situation is stressing you out, you have the right to protect your work environment.

These tips can help:

1. Offer supportive remarks.
2. State the facts without emotion. Describe the person's actions very simply. Then tell them how you believe they should change.
3. Tell the person how his problem affects you.

Other tips

- Make a pact that your chat will be solution-oriented. Stacie says she and 4 co-workers have a "gripe session" every day during lunch. "We discuss personal anxieties," she says, "however, we openly share how we plan to fix a problem. We strive for solutions, so it's not draining at all."
- Switch problems for creative solutions. Ask someone who's stuck on an issue: "If I were you and I had your problem, how would you advise me to manage it?"
- If things get draining, change the subject. If a friend has just placed a parent in a nursing home, listen and offer support. Next, steer the conversation to something positive. You might ask: "What are you doing for yourself? Are you finding time to walk or exercise?" Leave your friend with something to focus on besides the crisis of the moment.

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