
February 7, 2008**LIFE'S WORK**

It's Not the Job I Despise, It's You

By [LISA BELKIN](#)

THIS is the time of year for talk of love. When you write about the workplace, that tends to mean articles about love at work. Should you date a co-worker? Openly or clandestinely? How are you supposed to meet anyone who isn't a colleague when you spend all your time at work?

This will not be one of those articles. Because judging by my mail, the people mixing love and work are a fairly happy lot. It's a picnic to work with someone you love.

The real challenge is working with someone you hate.

"Hate is a strong word," one female reader, a few years out of school and working as an executive assistant at a big consumer products company, said of a co-worker whom "I strongly, strongly, strongly dislike."

Time was when the pair were work friends. They had lunch together regularly and made Starbucks runs for each other. They even joined forces when the work piled up. But then, about a year ago, there was a tussle over vacation dates, and the colleague, who had a tad less seniority, lost.

Since then there have been no shared lattes. Instead, the colleague "leaves her trash from lunch in my trash can, smelly things like blue cheese or cauliflower or tuna," said the reader, who prefers not to use her name for fear she will escalate hostilities. "She blows her nose and just misses my trash, so that my choice is to pick up her used tissue or leave it lying on my floor."

The reader fantasizes about retaliation, even watching old episodes of "The Office" to see what pranks Jim pulls on the clueless Dwight. Putting the stapler in a tub of Jell-O? Sending fake classified e-mail messages, supposedly from the [C.I.A.](#)?

"So far I haven't had the guts," she said. "But I'm working up to it."

Susan Storey describes a working relationship that is more "Scrubs" than "The Office." Remember when Dr. Elliot Reid broke off her engagement to the intern Keith Dudemeister, and he responded by calling her progressively nastier names in the hospital hallways? Ms. Storey's workplace was a small consumer magazine, not a hospital, and she and her partner were never engaged. But when she (the associate editor) ended things with him (the editor in chief) after a two-year relationship, he responded loudly.

Their desks were 10 feet apart, she said, and he spent a lot of time on the phone "sweet-talking other women" after the split. In the middle of this monologue, Ms. Storey was called by the president of the company, who told her "he was glad we had broken up because he had been wanting to fire my ex."

Ms. Storey took the high road; she used her contacts to help find a new job for him. "In another state," she said slyly.

There are more dueling Elliots and Keiths and Jims and Dwights in offices than you might guess. An online survey in 2006, by VitalSmarts, a company in Provo, Utah, that teaches communications skills to employees, found that 93 percent of the 967 respondents say they work with "nasty, unreliable or eccentric employees." And only one in four confront the hated one, the survey found.

That really isn't surprising, particularly since the offender is so often the boss.

"He's like Michael Scott, but stripped of any endearing qualities," an employee at a Boston ad agency said of her boss, comparing him to the incompetent, bumbling middle manager on "The Office." Her real-life supervisor, she said, "thinks he's funny but his jokes are terrible, he swears like a sailor, he's rude and sarcastic, and his job seems to be to suck up to the C.E.O."

"All I have learned from him is how to work with someone you hate," she added.

She has thought about quitting but thinks she needs to stay longer so that she does not have the résumé of a job jumper. Meanwhile, she is handling the situation by getting in her digs where she can. Before a recent meeting with her boss and the company's chief executive, she sent her boss an update of the accounts to be discussed, assuming he would not get around to reading it. As she had guessed, he turned to her at the meeting, and she sweetly said: "Oh, we haven't moved forward on that in a week because we were waiting for your comments on my e-mail."

Quitting is one way to deal with office hatred, and sabotage is another. But there are better ways, suggests Marsha Petrie Sue, the author of "Toxic People: Decontaminate Difficult People at Work Without Using Weapons or Duct Tape" (Wiley, 2007).

Ms. Sue divides hateful co-workers into categories, including the Steamroller (a bully who is not necessarily right but is determined), the Whine and Cheeser (who finds the dark side to everything, as in: "Cheez, I got a raise. I'll have to pay more taxes"), and the Backstabber (enough said). Ms. Sue knows so much about all these toxic types, she said, because "I used to be one of them."

As a manager on Wall Street, Ms. Sue was on the losing end of two wrongful-termination suits. Both times she had fired subordinates in a way that was, in her words, "totally wrong on so many levels." The first suit was brought because she criticized an employee's frequent absences saying: "Are you sure you're really sick? Come in here and we'll decide how sick you are and whether you should go home." The second was a result of her critique of another employee with child care problems: "You should have thought about that before you took this job."

What turned her around, Ms. Sue said, was an intervention. Her bosses insisted that she attend "charm school." But if management isn't willing to step forward at your workplace, Ms. Sue said, the trick is to "call out the behavior in a public way, don't just take it."

So the worker with the smelly trash might pick it up and carry it into her tormentor's cubicle when others are watching. And the manager who fails to answer e-mail messages should be asked in front of the chief executive, "Shall I leave a note on your desk whenever I send you an urgent e-mail since I know you get so many messages

every day?”

If all these working relationships sound beyond repair, consider the case of Anne DeMarzo and Howard Greenberg, who met at work selling real estate in 1985, were engaged in 1987, and broke things off in 1989.

She accused him of loving the dog more than her. He worried that she would get old and let herself go. She threw her engagement ring at him one night and stormed out.

A few years later they became partners in DeMarzo Realty, a Manhattan brokerage specializing in parking garages.

“Just because we weren't meant for each other doesn't mean we don't work great together,” Mr. Greenberg said.

Time helped them get past their acrimony, Ms. DeMarzo said, as did her realization that the problem with their relationship was, she said: “I was just too smart for him. He's shallow and needs his women dumb.”

(“I guess she still has a little anger,” Mr. Greenberg said.)

Clients are sometimes puzzled at how the two can share a one-room office and not kill each other.

“We're like every other married couple I know,” Mr. Greenberg said. “We see each other every day. We split our income. And we no longer have sex.”

E-mail: Belkin@nytimes.com.

[Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
