

# 9 awkward workplace scenarios and how to deal with them

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Awkward workplace scenarios... Most of us have encountered at least one of the below-listed scenarios. The big question remains: Should we or shouldn't we discuss the big elephant in the room?



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In my career as an HR leader, I have received questions from managers and colleagues asking how to deal with certain scenarios in the office. Some situations are tricky – it's not the work that makes things difficult in the workplace, but rather the people that you work with... and it will always be a factor if you don't work for yourself.

The challenging part of working with people is that not everyone has a high Emotional Intelligence, which is [listed as one of the most valuable soft skills to have in the next century](#).

We have a responsibility to ensure our teams are equipped with the necessary skills to “demonstrate” the behaviours we want. Let me explain. In one of the culture change initiatives that I was part of, it was about breaking down the silos in the business. As part of the solution, we have identified crucial moments when the behaviours are not aligned to what we want to achieve. One of the vital behaviours identified was around “if you see or feel something, say something”. We then had to equip our teams on how to have these candid yet respectful conversations, the Crucial Conversation workshop is one of the best I have come across.

Be careful that your ego is not high-jacking your happiness. In some research done by Reality based Leadership found that up to 2.5 hours per day are lost due to “drama” in the workplace.

Here are some of the scenarios:

## **1. Reporting a lazy co-worker (and potentially having people in the office think less of you as a result)**

Having a less productive colleague part of your team can really be challenging. Unfortunately, we can't change other people's behaviour but we can take responsibility for how we respond to a situation.

Think about your motive behind reporting your co-worker? What is the outcome you want to achieve? Have you tried to address this first with the colleague before feeling that you need to report this?

What could work is a daily stand-up meeting: It is a short meeting every day where the entire team keep one another accountable and provides support where needed. This is where the team share impediments, which tasks are done or outstanding, and which tasks are ready to be pulled from one team member's to-do list into someone else's. This might help to keep the entire team accountable and to perform at their best.

## **2. Taking a knock to the ego because you didn't get the promotion you wanted (and everyone keeps asking about the outcome)**

Sometimes we need to look at life (and unfavourable situations) from another angle and instead of feeling sorry for yourself about not getting the promotion, look at the growth opportunity. Be real about your disappointment and own your emotion, but don't let it discourage you to not give your best.

There will be many times in life where your plan may not work out as you've expected, so train your mind to rather see the opportunity (positives). Take a moment and reflect how you can grow out of this situation and become “better” – if you give your best, your time will come, and your efforts will be noticed.

## **3. Having to report an inappropriate manager/boss to HR (and potentially having them resent you afterwards)**

My first response to colleagues asking this type of advice was to coach them to have the discussion directly with their boss/manager first.

Unfortunately, most employees get uneasy when conflict arises and don't always address it or handle it with grace.

Workplace conflict will affect the office dynamic – even more reason why it's important to address and resolve the issue as soon as possible so everyone can get back to business.

We should create a culture where we can speak up. I also understand that this is not always the environment / culture certain companies operate in and you should definitely report an inappropriate manager to HR.

The team needs to know that they have a safe space when talking to the HR manager. When talking to HR, it would be

helpful to keep this in mind:

- Share the facts of the inappropriate behaviour. There will be the things that you can see or hear (subjective response); facts can't be argued (objective response). Don't say my boss is a bully. Be specific. What behaviour can you see or hear? For example, my manager is shouting at me during team meetings.
- Explain the impact of this behaviour and how it affects you. What is your "story" about the situation? How did you feel in that moment? Emotions should be acknowledged – giving the facts alone is not painting the whole picture and that is why elaborating on your experience is critical as well. For example: "My manager shouts at me during meetings and it is demoralizing and disrespectful."

#### **4. How should one cope with noisy co-workers without being the office killjoy?**

In an open office environment, it is especially tricky to "please" all team members. The best approach is to talk to your co-worker about how the noise affects your output. Grab a coffee together and create a "safe environment" where mutual respect and a shared goal is evident/present – you should be able to chat about this situation and come to a compromise.

It is very easy to be perceived as aggressive so ensure you are real and honest. Check your motive and ensure your behaviour is in line with what you want to achieve. And be sure that you also don't have an "annoying thing" that could impact the other person's nerves!

#### **5. How to deal with colleagues, or even bosses, taking credit for your work**

When looking at this scenario, it is key to identify the correct conversation to have. Is this only about them taking credit? Is there a pattern? Does this happen regularly or is this the first time? What is the impact of this on your relationship with your boss/co-worker?

It might be necessary to address all these issues – them taking credit for your work, the recurring pattern, as well as the impact on your relationship. If all these issues are relevant and you choose to address only one or two and not all three, the chances of this happening again are very possible.

#### **6. Coming back to work after a very wild office function (where you had one too many to drinks / hooked up with a co-worker, etc)**

This is a tricky one. Warren Buffet says, "It takes 20 years to build a reputation and 5 minutes to destroy it." Be mindful how you act at office functions. If you've acted in a way that is unprofessional, own your mistakes. I always say: "Forget the mistake; remember the lesson," and apologise at an appropriate time.

#### **7. You are caught slacking on the job (watching YouTube) by your boss**

We are all human, it happens, we make mistakes. If this is a pattern, your manager will most likely address this in a one-on-one session with you.

More importantly, you should reflect on why you're not committed to doing the work. What is fuelling your choice of watching YouTube instead of being productive? Not getting enough sleep? Demotivated? Not enjoying what you are doing? Procrastinating? Feeling overwhelmed?

It is important to identify the "why" and be real with your line manager and how he/she can help you before it negatively affects your work relationships, employability and your reputation. Sometimes a small change is all you need in order to be productive again to deliver your best work.

## **8. You were questioned why you didn't attend a meeting, but you were not aware that you were meant to be in that meeting**

In today's ever-changing world, we need to be able to think on our feet. Having said that, it is okay to say you weren't aware of the meeting. We are flooded by emails daily. Perhaps you had technical issues? Don't throw your colleague (the meeting organiser) under the bus. Just be honest and say you weren't aware of the meeting and perhaps you can have a quick update with a team member on what you have missed and pick-up what needs to be done.

## **9. When you feel as though you are being made to do work that falls outside of your job description**

Unfortunately, this is the "new normal" where star performers are given more work, and the ones not doing it, continue to slack. But it can count in your favour to think wider than just your job description. However, if this is a habit of your manager to continuously give you work, resulting in you missing your own deadlines, a conversation needs to take place with your line manager to address this.

Hopefully these scenarios inspired you to reflect on how you are handling awkward situations in the workplace. We are all responsible for our own actions and behaviours and we should focus our attention on what we can control.

### **ABOUT ANJA VAN BEEK**

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