

How To Work With People You Don't Like

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“There’s nothing you can do about it,” Wendy responded with a knowing resignation. “A lot of people are just self-centered jerks. And most managers couldn’t care less what’s fair or what you need. It’s always been that way around here. The best thing you can do is to just avoid people you don’t like. Don’t fight with them and don’t be nice to them – believe me, it just makes them bigger jerks. Simply bite your tongue when you’re with them and go about your business as if they weren’t there. And when you go home, forget they exist. They’re not worth it. Trust me, girl, for fifteen years it’s worked for me.”

“I hate some of these people,” Rachel confided. “I’ve never felt this way before, but some days, I really hate these people!”

Twenty-two year old Rachel pondered the advice. She loved her work but not her colleagues – at least not some of them. Wendy, an administrative assist, was a good friend. She always had a sympathetic ear and often, some helpful words of wisdom. This time, though, Rachel wasn’t so sure that this qualified as “wisdom.”

“I don’t know, Wen,” Rachel replied softly, almost inaudibly. She was nearing the end of her rope. “I wasn’t raised that way. Avoiding problems might work for awhile, but it doesn’t seem all that Christian to just bury things. Besides, I’m not real good at hiding how I feel. I hate some of these people. I’ve never felt this way in my life, but some days, I really *hate* these people.”

Rewind the tape twelve months. An energetic, freshly-minted college grad is interviewing for a reporter’s job at The City News. She’s excited about the opportunity – almost giddy – and she should be. This is the premier newspaper in the city and it would be a real coup for her to land such a position right out of school. Her 3.8 GPA, her editorship of the student newspaper, and the quality of her writing make Rachel a strong candidate. Being female, attractive and single probably doesn’t hurt either.

Two weeks later, Rachel gets the job. Everyone is friendly and nurturing for the first few days. Rachel spends several hours in conversation with colleagues eager to share with her secrets of success in the business, as well as how things “really work” at City. Before too long, though, the honeymoon gives way to reality.

Although Rachel loves being out on the street – digging up stories, meeting people, getting the real scoop for all the world to know – inside the office is a nightmare. Deadlines are pervasive but distractions are rampant. Among the distractions is the poison grapevine. Gossip thrives in this cliquish atmosphere: the news writers don’t like

the business writers. The sports writers harass the secretaries. The marketers are over-promising again. Managers have no clue what they're doing. Everyone's got someone to complain about, so it's tough to avoid getting sucked in to an acerbic conversation.

Over time Rachel becomes a popular target too, the little Christian girl who wants to make a difference. It's not so much her worldview that condemns her as it is her counter-cultural work ethic. Bursting with energy and a quest for excellence, Rachel is quickly labeled a "boss's pet" by the jaded journalists, a girl who ambitiously does whatever she can to impress. Soon rumors circulate about her extra-curricular dealings with higher-ups, her salacious attempts to get on the fast track to the editorial ranks. Patently untrue, Rachel is both hurt and embarrassed when she learns of the rumors.

Another distraction is Joan in the cubical adjacent to Rachel's. Loud, brazen, and a great writer, her cube is her castle, a little fiefdom where she feels at liberty to do whatever she pleases. Apathetic to its effect on others, Joan keeps a radio on all day. She blabs incessantly on the phone with her friends, and she more than occasionally sneaks a cigarette, despite office policy. Concentration is hopeless while working next to Joan, and to make matters worse, Joan is unresponsive to Rachel's polite pleas for some consideration.

Rachel's boss Scott also sidetracks her daily. Technically terrific but managerially inept, the only thing worse than his leadership is his halitosis. Rachel dreads his twice-a-day stops at her cubical, stops where he tries to regale her with tales of his personal life while often reminding her to pay more attention to her deadlines. He never seems to get the irony.

Perhaps worse than being a distraction, though, Scott thinks he has a Ph.D. in everything, leaving a trail of arrogance wherever he goes. Typical of this disposition is Rachel's annual performance review meeting. When she tries to alert Scott to the problems in the workplace that are undermining productivity – the noise, the gossip, the chitchat, the office politics, and so on – Scott only gets angry and admonishes Rachel for lecturing him on how to do his job. If she "would just spend more time focusing on meeting deadlines and less time being a busybody," she might have a chance of getting the raise she's requesting – next year. For now she gets the standard two percent.

So much for Scott's interview promise of Rachel achieving market pay after the first year. But, of course, there's no talking to him about that either.

Finally, there was this afternoon's fiasco. At the weekly staff meeting, Scott queries the reporters: "We need to cover the school board race. Any of you want to brave that one?"

"How about Rachel for that assignment?" offers Patty, knowing that Rachel likes education issues.

"It would probably be better to have someone with more experience," grouses Ralph, a veteran writer. "That's going to be a pretty high profile race this year."

“Rachel has done a lot of writing,” Patty shoots back, “both before she came here and since she arrived.”

“Well, there’s writing and then there’s *writing*,” Ralph retorts sarcastically. “I would think that by now even *you* would be able to tell the difference!”

Ouch. In a toxic department of pretentious press writers, one-liners are ubiquitous, but this one actually turned heads.

“Don’t you have a bottle of wine to get back to Ralph?” Maurice snaps, trying to boomerang the insults.

“Yeah, I’m splitting it with your wife tonight!” Ralph returns with a laugh, clearly amused by his impressive wit.

Two hours later, an exasperated, battle-weary Rachel now sits with her friend Wendy, looking for answers and maybe some hope that things will get better. “I was confident that this would be a terrific job, a perfect place to learn the ropes of the business, to develop as a writer...” Rachel confides, her voice trailing off.

Wendy smiles wryly. “Confidence is what you have before you know the facts, honey. You’ll figure it out over time.”

Rachel wants to “figure it out” now. When she first took this position, she had wanted to do great work and maybe even model Christ in a secular workplace. Now her goals are considerably more modest – like being able to sleep at night. She isn’t going to quit, she knows that much. But she also doesn’t want to just avoid the whole mess.

What should Rachel do?

And if you were a manager in this organization, what should you do about the dysfunctions you see in it?