

For Bill Gates, tirades came at a cost

In February 1985, Ida Cole joined Microsoft as one of its first female vice presidents. She had just spent four years at Apple working for Steve Jobs.

Within months, her relationship with the mercurial Bill Gates worsened. His confrontational style created a tense workplace.

In September 1985, Cole, 37, found out she needed to undergo life-threatening surgery. At the time, the division she ran was about to start shipping Excel, a critical product launch for Microsoft.

Cole postponed the surgery to complete a media tour and manage other aspects of the Excel release. Then she had the surgery.

Rushing to return to the office just three weeks after her medical procedure, she dashed off nearly 200 performance reviews on her employees that were due by Oct. 31. On her third day back, she met with Gates.

Not known for his empathy, Gates did not express much concern for Cole's health. Instead, he began yelling at her and insisting she was not up to speed about a product scheduling issue.

"They thought I had ovarian cancer when they did the surgery," Cole recalls. "It was really scary and not a great thing to go through ... So Bill's screaming at me 'I'm not doing it anymore.'"

Cole arranged for a transfer to another Microsoft unit where she didn't need to interact with Gates. She wound up spending five successful years at the company, leaving in 1990.

After Gates drove away Cole, he temporarily took over her job as head of applications. But the extra duties added to his already full plate, and it took two years to hire a replacement.

— Adapted from *Hard Drive*, James Wallace and Jim Erickson, John Wiley & Sons.