

Corner office career advice: Business rivals, work-life balance, mediation and more

In this list of career advice from the corner office, our corporate veteran gives the anonymous, but honest, truth about business rivals (friend or foe?), how to balance work and life, and so much more.

Don't make 'rival' a dirty word

Q. I just took over a small company and am considering befriending the main business rival in our area. In general, do you think that "keep your enemies close" game is worth playing?

A. Yes—if it's a real friendship you're after. When I've dropped the sneaky, duplicitous angle in the past and instead opened an actual line of communication to competitors, it's resulted in all of us learning more and doing better. We've even made a game of our head-to-head wranglings, staying honest and above board about everything. And the connections have proven extremely valuable. The first contact, I can tell you, is critical. Share something personal, maybe even give them a tip and offer to help out in some small way.

Benign dictatorship? It's a gamble

Q. I find that my people respond powerfully to assertive, one-sided authority. But is this model dead? Am I a dinosaur?

A. You're definitely bucking the trend of empathetic leadership and relentless consensus-building—but there's always been something in human beings that snaps to attention when a leader metaphorically slams a fist on a table and says, "This is how it's gonna be."

Pick your spots, though. Someone who commands too often runs the risk of ruling by either fear or just a slow beat-down of the staff's will to resist or even offer input. Identify the issues and projects that are most important and play benign dictator only with those. For the rest, spread the power around.

That age-old struggle, work/life balance

Q. I find it very difficult to overcome the feeling that all my hard work is causing me to miss too much of my children's lives. Any advice?

A. I've always thought there is no magic number of memories we need to collect or create to be content, no meter of hours defining good parenthood. In the end, it's a small set of priceless memories both we and our parents recall about our childhoods. Don't think in terms of the amount of time you spend with your kids; focus on making the time you do spend with them count. And that doesn't mean frantically playing catch-up: It just means being the very best version of yourself when you're with them. That will be remembered and treasured, trust me. If your conscience persists, make sure you can define how your days in the office help them just as much as they help you.

Too much mind, not enough substance

Q. Through my entire work career, I've always felt I've never gotten the credit for an intelligence I believe I possess. Am I deluding myself? Is it strange to feel I'm smarter than everyone else in the room?

A. It might sound odd to say intelligence is overrated, but think for a moment about what we're actually looking for in a leader. It's not pure brains; it's the *products* of them. Without something tangible to point to and say, "My mind created this," raw intelligence in itself isn't terribly unique. What are you making to dazzle them? What are you saying that leaves them speechless? What numbers have you sent through the roof, and whose lives have you improved with that big noggin?

I'm sorry! I'm so so sorry!'

Q. I blurted something a little hurtful to a colleague recently; it wasn't an offensive statement so much as sharing a secret I should not have. I apologized but it obviously didn't take. What should I do now?

A. You've done exactly what you can do, and that's really all there is to it. From this point onward, every overture you make toward forgiveness will likely just make things worse, bringing back memories of the transgression. I apologize once and then let time do the back-end work, which it almost always does. If time fails, that means you have a hardcore grudgekeeper on your hands, at which point my advice becomes: Remove yourself from them. Grudgekeepers are not good folks to work with.

When it's okay to be a little paranoid

Q. In a society where things we did and said twenty years ago can be so easily retrieved and held against us, I'm nervous seeing my name attached to so many work documents I never actually see, emails from the company, etc. Am I being needlessly paranoid?

A. Not at all. It's only smart to put a system in place that doesn't automatically stamp your name on anything you haven't formally signed off on. It's scary how many workplaces so liberally help themselves to the identities of the staff when releasing communications to the world.

Remind everyone around you that we now live in a business world where putting a negative spin on, and inventing a new context for, past communication has become a valuable currency in the hands of people who don't have our best interests at heart. Remember when the main worry was that a typo would get out to an important client?

Desperate times call for desperate mediations

Q. Two people who work for me have an extreme personality conflict going back a couple of years. I think it's irreparable. Separating them is impractical; they represent the entirety of their division. What should I do?

A. Your question brings back unpleasant memories of a similar situation. At my wit's end, here's what I tried: sitting them down individually and asking them to write out—not speak—what they thought the solution to the problem was. By giving them a couple of days to cohere their thoughts in writing, I figured they would be more measured and logical in their responses. I didn't reveal to either of them what was written. Then I waited, hoping that they would muse upon their thoughts, and the fact that the other had gone through the same exercise. Whether this was a factor in the truce that seemed to form months later, I can't say. But I do believe in putting matters directly into the problem employees' hands—you're there to solve business problems, not

personal ones.

Have a question for Executive Z? Submit it to contentmanager@businessmanagementdaily.com. All questions will remain anonymous.