

How to work with a control freak

When Elaine, an experienced marketing executive at a New York frozen food company, began working on a campaign for a new product, she quickly ran into a problem. The dilemma didn't involve which pictures to use on social media or how to spend advertising dollars. Rather, her obstacle stemmed from the head of the marketing department, David.

David would not leave her alone. The product had been his idea, and he felt that only he knew how to promote it. A few times a day, he would manage to wander by her office and inquire about the campaign. In fact, he went over every detail with her so many times that she thought she would scream. David simply could not leave Elaine alone to run the campaign as she saw fit.

Such bossy, micromanaging behavior leads to problems in the work environment. A controlling coworker or boss can make a competent professional feel like a new employee. Nobody enjoys someone constantly looking over her shoulder or questioning her every move. Ultimately, it can harm morale and cause high-performing employees to simply throw in the towel.

An exceptionally high need to control everything has an air of abnormality that goes beyond ensuring quality, careful work. Thus, individuals displaying this extreme controlling behavior have come to be known as control freaks.

Signs of a control freak

Control freaks border on being obsessive-compulsive. They do not merely have a hands-on attitude. Instead, they have a stranglehold on everything their subordinates or coworkers do. They can't let control out of their hands for a minute. Even when they have supposedly given others a project to do on their own, the control freak continues double and triple-checking the work.

Control freaks see potential disaster lurking at every corner. Because of this fear, a controlling person often radiates tension and anxiety. She may complain about having too much on her plate and feeling overwhelmed. To an outsider, the solution to this problem seems obvious — letting go and empowering others to do their jobs. Individuals with controlling tendencies, however, equate this option with opening the door for things to go wrong.

People like David nag, check up on you, and bombard you with questions and reminders because they are afraid of what would happen if they didn't. They feel that if they let one little detail slip, the whole situation will go out of control. In their mind, this spiral could lead to their demise.

Other behaviors often exhibited by control freaks include:

Inability to delegate

Forget the notion of many hands making light work. A control freak would rather handle everything himself. He stands by the adage that if you want something done right do it yourself.

Desire to work alone

Some control freaks avoid working on teams. Independent work enables them to secure maximum control over an assignment. They like not needing to rely on other people's efforts or compromising on how things get done.

Obsessing over the uncontrollable

Control freaks expend a lot of effort trying to prevent bad things from happening. They waste time worrying about everything that could possibly go wrong rather than focusing on factors actually under their control.

Indecisiveness

They may insist on excruciatingly checking and rechecking every angle before coming to any conclusion. As a result, they can be exasperatingly slow to make up their minds, even on minor matters. This behavior frustrates coworkers, clients, or others waiting on a decision.

Correcting others when they are wrong

Whether someone mispronounces a word or leaves a tiny detail out when recounting an event, the control freak feels obligated to point out the error or omission. The fact that drawing attention to minor slips embarrasses others does not cross his mind.

Needing the last word

Control freaks love to set the rules and demand others follow them. They are reluctant to ever admit they are wrong. Doing so would mean someone could use this "weakness" against them. Or, they fear even a simple mistake could radically tarnish their reputation.

Reasons behind control issues

It might seem that someone with unusually strong controlling tendencies would try to stop such behavior. After all, the offender can't be totally unaware of others rolling their eyes, sighing, or coming right out and telling him to get off their case, right?

What frequently happens is that the controlling person justifies the behavior. He may see himself as simply a bit of a perfectionist or as an exceptionally dedicated employee. He may insist the company needs his type of hyper-thoroughness because other team members are too incompetent. Rather than labeling himself a "freak," he may adopt the attitude that he is actually a savior.

Controlling tendencies can be difficult to conquer. The behavior can stem from deeper psychological issues such as personality disorders, anxiety disorders, phobias, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Making true progress often involves seeing a mental health professional.

A control freak's current mindset may have roots in his past. Experts believe some people with control issues grew up with rigid, overbearing, and overly critical parents. As children, pressure was put on them to behave like adults. They feared "messing up" and losing approval from family members. Or, the environment may have been volatile or abusive. They learned to live on high alert to spot triggers before problems occurred.

Many control freaks are inwardly very angry, but they can't get outwardly angry because they are so inhibited. They express their anger by over-controlling and constantly nitpicking others. By manipulating and pressuring others to change and do what they want, control freaks avoid having to change themselves.

Dealing with a control freak

Whatever the reason behind a control freak's behavior, the bottom line is that those around him suffer. Victims of a control freak's actions may ponder how to get the person to change. Playing armchair mental health professional, though, does not usually help. Likely, the person with controlling tendencies does not want your advice. Calling the person a jerk and hoping he will get the hint probably won't do much either.

Rather, a better strategy for those confronting this issue in the work environment might be figuring out how to coexist. Here are some suggestions.

Reframe your own mindset

The word "freak" immediately generates negative connotations. Try moving your distaste for the person down a notch. Instead of labeling the person as abnormal, think of the individual just as someone who likes to take charge of things. Do your best to appreciate the individual's better qualities, such as being a hard worker. And instead of immediately dismissing everything she says, stay open to the possibility that she may have some good ideas to consider.

Try passive resistance

Often the control freak is checking up on so many things at once that if you say, "I'll get back to you on that," he may forget all about it. Try "yessing" him to death and then going about your own business.

Avoid arguments and power struggles

Control freaks feel they must win. It's their nature. They can back you into a corner with nitpicking arguments until you give in out of exhaustion. Instead of bickering, make a neutral comment like, "I understand what you're saying." Even a control freak can compromise when he realizes you are not out to get him.

Choose your battles

Dealing with someone who is too particular about little things is annoying, but chances are you can be the peacemaker and simply let unimportant comments go. Matters become more difficult when someone micromanages decisions of greater meaning to you. Sometimes you must stand your ground with these types of people, even if conflict ensues. Know when to shrug off something and when to draw the line. When you do speak up, keep it simple. State what you believe, feel, or need. If they try to turn it into an argument, refuse the bait. Remain calm, and restate your position.

Find alternatives to the word "no"

As might be expected, control freaks hate when others say this word. So, instead of setting the stage for arguments, consider gentler phrasing when denying their command. Try "What I've decided to do is . . ." or "Another way of approaching the matter is . . ." rather than using what they hear as "fighting" words. If you do decide a flat-out refusal is necessary, be clear and firm. Avoid tacking on justifications. This extra language just provides more fuel for the fire.

Don't invite opinions

Looking for ideas for a new campaign or advice on handling a client? Seek help from another team member rather than your coworker with controlling tendencies. Why crack the door an inch when you know she'll kick it open a mile?

Stay one step ahead

Got a boss or coworker who always wants to know where things stand? Be proactive in providing updates and entering the current status of tasks in your shared project management system. The controlling person can see proof of progress, which might stop him from bugging you.

Keep stress levels down

Controlling tendencies escalate in anxious situations, so do what you can to keep the controlling person away from triggers. For example, say your company has a client known for frequently changing his mind. Since control freaks often get rattled when thrown off-course from their carefully crafted plans, a manager may want to assign this customer to a different team member.

Another potentially anxiety-reducing action is to flat out ask the person “What are you worried about?” Get an idea of what induces panic. Perhaps someone is worried that an assignment won’t get done on time. She becomes overly controlling when events suggest that result. Breaking the project into small, manageable units and checking each off as completed may soothe nerves by providing evidence of being on track.

Don’t expect a lot of positive feedback

Control freaks can wreak havoc on your self-esteem. Even if you do things their way, they may still criticize your efforts as not up to their standards. You may think your boss does not like your work because he never compliments you.

Realize that control freaks are very stingy with praise. Inwardly, however, they may have a very high regard for your work. Rather than spend time worrying and guessing, look to others you trust for feedback.

As an added perspective, it pays to remember that control freaks usually are equally hard on themselves. They are often self-critical and beat themselves up when things don’t go correctly, even in circumstances beyond their control.

Detach

Take a deep breath. Leave the room or hang up the phone. Ignore negative comments. Sit elsewhere at lunch. Colleagues should be cordial to one another, but there’s no law saying you must be friends with someone who makes you feel bad about yourself. Sometimes, spending the least amount of time with the person as possible truly is the best route. If she inquires about the cold shoulder, explain.

People often describe control freaks as annoying or frustrating. However, some offenders may cross the line into abusive territory. Seek help for such situations. Depending on who is trying to be controlling, this may involve alerting your manager or human resources. Smart leaders take action against bullying and harassment rather than see employees leave to find a new job.