



Surefire Career Stoppers

ARE YOU A high-maintenance employee? You know, someone who is always bashing the boss or the organization—or always in your boss's office complaining about your workload, someone else, or life in general. Of course not. Not you. But maybe there's someone at work like that—a co-worker perhaps or, worse, a member of your staff.

Take "Joe." He's a 10-year employee of a large federal agency. Recently, Joe's boss wanted him to apply for a promotion. So, he called Joe at home one night to schedule an interview. But Joe, who works a flextime schedule, said, "I can't come in then. That's my day off." Believe it or not, Joe was dumbfounded when the job went to someone else.

Then there's "Peg," who works for a manufacturing firm. Peg is a good worker, when she is in the office. The problem is that she seems to be out of the office a lot. In recent months, she has left work early on at least six occasions. One day, she was having furniture delivered. Another time, she said that her refrigerator was broken and she had to meet the repairman. On another occasion, she told her boss that she had unexpected company coming for dinner.

Would you believe that people do those kinds of things and still expect raises and promotions? It's a mystery to me why, in many large bureaucracies especially, people expect to be rewarded for mediocre performance or work habits that more closely resemble those of an indifferent college sophomore than a seasoned business professional. You can get away with such antics for a while. But if (or when) your organization downsizes, someone is likely to recall that you don't work as hard as other people. And as for helping position you for career advancement, forget it!

There are other surefire career stoppers. Though they might seem like obvious no-brainers to avoid, you'd be surprised how many people

still commit these faux pas in the workplace.

Ever tell sexist, homophobic, or ethnic jokes at work? As Joan Rivers would say: "Grow up!" If you're telling jokes about ethnic groups and peoples' body parts, I have to ask, "What grade are you in?" In today's diverse workplace, there's no place for that kind of stuff. We all need to

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be sensitive to others. And, by the way, that includes being sensitive to gays and lesbians. Some people still insist on leaving them out of the diversity equation. But, to me, people who do that are simply showcasing their parochialism.

Ever disparage people on email or voicemail? Whether you realize it, what you say in email or voicemail messages is basically in the public domain. Both can be forwarded and passed around in an organization, and they often are. Never say anything in voicemail or email messages that could become grist for the rumor mill. Be especially careful with email messages because they can be used as legal documents in a lawsuit.

Do you have to win every conversation? We all know someone like that at work. Usually, it's someone insecure or inexperienced whose "intrusive intelligence" gets in the way of his or her success. Such people insist on winning every conversation at work, even with bosses, on small, technical points—"It's *to-mab-to*, I tell you, not *to-may-to*!" The problem is that you can win conversational battles and still lose the workplace war.

"George" is a good example. He's a bright individual whose career has stalled at a fairly senior level. Why? Because he's a know-it-all who insists

on always being right. And though he has risen to his current level by virtue of his technical skills, he's unlikely to go any further because of his lack of political or social acumen. *George, wake up!* Cultivate a self-deprecating and down-to-earth sense of humor. The more successful you become, the more that will serve you as a professional.

Do you browbeat staff? I have seen both men and women be guilty of browbeating. In the days when I did a lot of executive coaching, I found that treating staff members badly can be a trait of very bright, otherwise high-potential, managers and professionals. It probably stems from their lack of experience working collaboratively with people. But in today's team-based organizations, speaking condescendingly to others is inappropriate—whether they are your staff members, peers, or bosses. Sooner or later, someone will call you on it.

The behaviors I've described vary in the degree of seriousness. But the fact is that displaying any of them can cause your career to self-destruct. That's because the workplace isn't just more diverse than ever before, it's also more complex. As companies become more global, and as social values evolve, we must be more sensitive to how our own behavior and actions affect others: co-workers, staff members, *and* customers.

So, do you think that you might be doing anything to sabotage your career? If in doubt, ask a trusted friend, a respected boss, or someone who works for you. At the very least, pick up a book on the subject or consult a counselor if you have doubts about how your work style and behavior may be affecting others. That isn't a sign of weakness, by the way, it's the sign of someone who knows when to reach out to others for help.

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