



Setting the Pace Against Would-Be Rivals

By Mary Ellen Slayter
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Competition is at the heart of capitalism, among co-workers as well as companies.

Almost three-quarters of advertising and marketing executives polled by the staffing service Creative Group said their employees are competitive with each other. And they say this isn't a bad thing: Nearly nine out of 10 respondents who reported competitive office environments said that enhanced productivity.

But I'm not sure that's true in all workplaces. It's one thing when people are competing to meet outside sales goals. In other cases, competition can prove a distraction and undermine the collegiality a team needs.

It's certainly getting to one woman, a secretary at a public high school in Virginia who spoke on condition of anonymity. Her rival is the person who serves as her backup when she's gone.

She said she generally likes working with the woman, but that things have occasionally gotten a bit weird. "There are times when I feel like she's showing me up in front of others, in particular my boss," she said. "We'll be in a discussion about doing something, and as I'm thinking through the situation she immediately jumps in and 'volunteers' to do it. That's fine, if that's what she wants to do -- I have enough to do as it is.

"However, recently she asked me if she could take over the monthly meeting we have with the support staff. She likes making fancy fliers and agendas, bulletin boards, coordinating birthday celebrations, etc. I said sure, if she would like to do that. This again was in front of my boss."

The meeting went well, the secretary said. But afterward, a rumor began circulating that her rival was "taking over."

The secretary said she believes her job is safe, but the rumor has her doubting her status at work. "Because this rumor is coming from my own colleagues, I'm not sure what to think of it. My gut tells me to forget it, don't worry about it, but at the same time I don't want to lose the respect of my colleagues."

The secretary's problems with her rival -- and the insecurity it can breed -- seem to be part of human nature, affecting people of all ages at all levels of society.

"In many ways the work world is no different from junior high school," said Tamar McLachlan, a career coach in the District. "People spread rumors, gossip is abundant, there is the competitive edge and insecurity. Instead of worrying about whether other students think our clothes are cool or our shoes are hip, we worry about whether our colleagues think we are competent, whether we are admired or looked down upon."

Such worries know no limits, she said. "I work with CEOs of some of the top companies in the world, as well as young people who are in their first job, and interestingly, the same insecurities show up."

And she offers them all essentially the same advice. The secretary should "focus on her work, her strengths, her interests and her relationships within the workplace." Instead of obsessing about what her colleague is doing, she should use her energy to show her own strengths -- not in an effort to "one-up" her colleague, but to allow herself to shine, McLachlan said.

"If her colleagues are going to respect her, it will be for her own merits." She "will feel best, and have the strongest foundation to stand on, if she comes from a place of sincerity, building confidence based on what she has to offer."

Of course, there are other satisfying -- if less mature -- ways to handle such situations. Allen, an electrical engineer who spoke on condition that his last name not be published, discovered that right out of college, when he took a job as a test engineer in a product development laboratory. He had worked as an electronic technician in the Navy, giving him more practical experience than would usually be expected of someone his age. One of his co-workers, Ray, took notice.

Every Tuesday there was a team meeting in which the project engineer asked for input on issues with the system they were testing. "Every Monday afternoon Ray asked me what I thought was important," Allen said. "On Monday he would speak up first and raise the issues he had pumped me for the day before."

It took about two weeks before Allen figured out what was going on -- and crafted a way to get back at this idea-stealing rival.

"Monday mornings I would chat with the project engineer and make suggestions and hint at issues that might have been tested before I arrived, and we'd laugh about some that seemed silly. If he laughed at a [ridiculous] idea, I would pass that idea to Ray that afternoon. When Ray brought it up the next morning the project engineer looked at me and smiled. It became our weekly inside joke. It took a month for Ray to figure it out."