

## “COPING WITH INCOMPETENT CO-WORKERS”



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We have seen it countless times in the workplace: the new executive who replaces his inherited staff with former trusted associates, regardless of their competency; the business owner who keeps her long term loyal employee on staff even though she refuses to change to keep up with the times; or the manager who just can't seem to address a worker's lack of accountability.

Employees who must cope with these situations on a daily basis may feel helpless to do anything about them. Long-term and left unresolved, this can become de-motivating to the better workers who feel that they must carry the extra weight. In addition, they may feel the need to play "politics" in order to get things done or not to ruffle someone's feathers.

Those who work with incompetent or unmotivated co-workers are torn between three options: putting up with it ("I'll wait it out until he leaves or retires"); creating work-arounds to get things done ("I guess I'll have to ask someone else or do it myself."); or bringing the issue to the attention of the boss in the hopes that he or she will be open to hearing the feedback and consider taking remedial action.

Even though putting up with unresponsive coworkers is frustrating, many choose to deal with it by simply ignoring it. People who passively give in to the circumstances usually do so because they have neither the motivation nor the skills to deal with it. So they tolerate things as they are, willing to lower their own standards to avoid the possibility of conflict or retaliation.

The second option is chosen by the majority of co-workers, who feel powerless to change the situation, but are personally motivated to find a way to get the job done despite the obstacles. The detours created by work-arounds may take extra time and energy on their part, but pride in their work or taking care of the customer justifies that effort for them. When the workaround effort becomes constant and excessive, however, resentment will build as he or she ends up doing their own job plus someone else's. This will ultimately strain relationships or become intolerable to the point that the person gives up and quietly leaves.

The third option is the road least traveled. There are those exceptional employees who are willing to deal openly and directly with the person who is perpetuating the situation and has the authority to change it: their boss. This can be a risky proposition and one that others avoid because they fear the consequences of speaking up. Those who bring it out in the open are willing to do this, however, because they cannot ignore it, won't tolerate a work-around, and feel the need to attempt to bring the situation to resolution.

They are willing to take this chance, knowing that unless or until someone is willing to take that step, nothing will change. The relative success of this is dependent on both the way in which the conversation is delivered, and the boss's openness or resistance to such difficult feedback.

Regardless of the outcome, those who have taken the appropriate steps to address the issue can have the peace of mind that they have maintained their professional integrity and standards. And, if they choose to leave, which the better employees are likely to do, it will send a clear message to management about the consequences of keeping the wrong people on board.