

(U) Ask Zelda!: Taking the "Ouch" Out of a Slouch

FROM: "Zelda," Dispenser of Advice on Workplace Issues

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(U) The entire article below is unclassified.



Hello Zelda,

I need your help. I recently took a leadership position and so far have had a great transition into my new duties. The first few months were great, until my main mission point of contact took a new job. His replacement does not have a "go-getter" attitude. He skips meetings, gives me incorrect information, and does not take his job seriously at all. All of these actions force me to work longer hours to make up for his laziness. He knows that at the end of the day I am not going to let the task go unanswered. So he frequently talks about sports, and is seen on his unclass workstation on ESPN. I have tried to be nice to him, but I am at my breaking point. How can I work around this person's terrible work ethic?

--Super Stressed Supervisor

Dear SSS,

Congratulations on your new position! Whether leading a small team or a large organization, leadership can be very rewarding. It also comes with its share of headaches.

If this is your first leadership position, I would advise you first off to get a mentor. Even if you had a technical mentor before, you should now have a management mentor. This person will be able to provide you tailored, ongoing advice for dealing with situations like this that arise as you navigate your new role.

For now, and with limited knowledge of your specific situation, here are my suggestions.

From your note, it doesn't sound like the person you are referring to works for you. If he does, the answer is easy--you would counsel him on his job performance. Your supervisor and LEAD classes can help you gain the necessary skills for this. But without the power to hold him accountable, you can try the following.

The Front Door--take the direct approach, and start as low on the totem pole as possible.

Plan A:

Your first step should be to have a talk with this deadbeat. (For the sake of brevity, I'll call him Edsel.) And stop being so nice. Now, I'm not suggesting that you turn into an ogre, but if you smile and downplay his slacker-ness, he'll never get the message that there's a problem. You need to approach him cordially, but with your serious face on.

Stress your mutual goals and the importance of setting up a process to achieve them. Since he

appears to be a sports fan, you could try sprinkling in some sports analogies about teamwork. Tell him in a firm but polite way that you had a great relationship with his predecessor (whom I'll call Terry), and that you'd like to have the same kind of partnership with him. Be specific when you describe what worked for you. Did Terry give you daily updates? Meet with you regularly? Include you on operational emails?

Ask Edsel to do the same. Tell him exactly what you need from him--including deadlines--and get his agreement to follow through.

Be open to his point of view. He may see things a different way or have a reason why he can't give you what you need. Listen and consider his take on the situation. Some compromise may be needed.

Plan B:

If the direct approach doesn't work, contact his supervisor. (Is the supervisor at the same management level as you? If he's a tier above, go to Plan C.) Explain that you're not getting what you need from Edsel and that the mission/organization is suffering. His supervisor should either counsel Edsel until his work improves, or assign another employee who is not such a dud to be your liaison.

In both of the above cases, provide feedback. Meet again with Edsel (Plan A) or his supervisor (Plan B) a week or two after your initial meeting and let them know whether things have improved. If they have, thank them for helping to rectify the situation; if not, ask for a higher level of effort/assistance.

Plan C:

Your next recourse is to elevate it to your own boss. Your management should be able to work out an arrangement with Edsel's management that doesn't involve you working extended hours to make up for his lack of initiative. And be sure to focus on what you need that he isn't providing. Omit mention of his sports talk and ESPN.

The Back Door

The good news is that you had a few months of great training and transition into your new position. By now you should have the lay of the land and know the players. Is there someone else you can reach out to to get the information you need?

The Doghouse

Take heart; if Edsel is as bad an employee as he sounds, I'm sure you're not the first to notice. If he doesn't shape up, he will probably be gone from that position before long.

Zelda

(U) For this unrelated question that arrived in Zelda's mailbag...

(U) From the one side of phone calls we can't help but overhear in our office, we believe that one of our co-workers is on the receiving side of an abusive spousal relationship (verbally abusive if nothing else). No one knows the person well enough to approach them, and of course we could be completely wrong, and we only hear one side of it.

(U) What, if anything, to do?

...Zelda deferred to the experts at NSA's Employee Assistance Service (**EAS**). They responded as follows:

(U) "In response to the situation, the employee who has overheard the conversation could tell their management about their concerns. The manager could meet with their employee privately to discuss their concerns. The manager could offer EAS services to the employee. We have a clinician on duty every day who could meet with the employee quickly. We could also provide support to the manager as they have this difficult conversation with their employee." See also the **Workplace Violence Prevention website**.
