



(U) Ask Zelda!: Break it Up!

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

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(U) The below column is unclassified in its entirety.

Dear Zelda,

What can one do about fellow employees (particularly contractors and military) who, for their hourly breaks or their long-awaited HOUR-LONG break, come to my desk to chit chat. Even though I'm engaged in work, they walk up to me and start talking. Bearing in mind, not only is this NOT MY BREAK, I do not TAKE BREAKS, except to get my food or use the restroom. How can I kindly inform them that they are disrupting my work? My posture and the OMG look on my face apparently are too subtle. Some are daily offenders, and some are much less frequent. Please note: I did not include NSA civilians because they rarely speak to each other.

Thank you,
Shoot Me Now

Dear Shoot Me,

An *hour-long* break? What organization do you work for??

I have noticed this behavior in just about every office I've been in, and it has not been limited to contractors and military. There is one factor that allows this situation to flourish:

the weak link (a.k.a. the too-nice person).

This is someone polite who listens to--and acts interested in--the conversation. Even non-committal grunting can be seen as encouragement to continue for these visiting "breakers." The weak link may not be the intended target of the visitor, but provides an excuse for lingering in the cubicle (for example, if the object of one's secret affection works in the same cubicle bay).

It sounds like you might be the weak link -- time to change that.

You must, at all costs, avoid being seen as a good or sympathetic listener. Perfect the stay-away-from-me vibe. This involves a quick glance up when the interloper approaches (extra points if you scowl) and then keep your eyes glued on your monitor. Keep typing as she talks, even if you type gibberish. If she says something that requires a response, count to 5 (slowly) before answering, and then keep your response brief. Something that doesn't invite further comment.

Other options are:

- Excuse yourself to make a phone call.
- Say, "I'm sorry, I really have to get this report out."
- Squint at your monitor and mutter something under your breath, letting them know that you are engrossed in an issue on the screen.
- Stop working, turn to face her, and ask, "Can I help you with something?"
- Enlist a friend to give you an "out." This might be someone in the room who notices you have been cornered, or someone you can send a quick email or instant message to who will call you on the phone. When it rings, answer it and then tell the "breaker" it's an important call that you have to take. If they don't immediately leave, say "This is going to take a while."

I'm sure this sounds harsh and impolite, but if you have already tried subtle body language and gotten no results, this is the next step.

By the way, I find it sad that, in this break-laden (broken?) work center, the NSA civilians rarely speak to each other. Sure, too much chit-chat is disruptive, but a short, friendly greeting now and again wouldn't hurt!

-Edna