Co-Worker Conundrum: The Slacker

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Sometimes it feels like there is never enough time to complete all of your daily job duties and responsibilities, not to mention other duties and special projects as assigned. But when those special projects have you working with a colleague who isn’t pulling their weight, your workload can get out of hand pretty quickly. What to do? Our Reference Desk columnists offer their advice on how to handle a slacking team member.

Q I have a co-worker who never seems to pull their own weight. In groups, they constantly pass tasks onto others or say, “that isn’t my job.” I suspect their individual work isn’t getting done, either, as they frequently pass assignments delegated to them to others. It’s annoying and creates more work for other people. How can I handle this situation without losing my cool?
Dolly: There’s a reason no one ever wants to do group projects. Trying to understand how and why other people work the way they do can be an endless source of frustration, even if they’re doing their best. And when you’re trying to accomplish something together, it’s a recipe for disaster to have a co-worker who is shirking their responsibilities.

An important maxim to keep in mind is that you can only control your own behavior. Since your colleague isn’t under your supervision, you don’t need to feel responsible for their apparent performance issues. (Like Elsa said, “Let it go.”) What you can control is your response to them and your exposure to their frustrating behavior. On those group projects where they are insisting, “That’s not my job,” try gently pushing back with: “We’re all taking on different aspects of this project. Is there a reason you don’t want to do this portion? Is there another area you feel comfortable working on?” Perhaps the issue is tied to a lack of knowledge or fear of failure on their part.

On the subject of your co-worker not doing their own work, it can be hard to point out when things aren’t getting done, unless their work intersects with your own. You don’t want to be the person pointing fingers at someone else not doing their work, only to have it turn out that they are working on a project you didn’t know about, or they are on reduced duty hours, or any number of other things. What you can do, since their behavior does create an increased workload for others, is to calmly point out to your supervisor where others are having to fill in for your co-worker’s lapses, or where tasks are being improperly delegated. If your supervisor isn’t responsive to this information, it may mean they aren’t capable of managing a low-performing employee, and this definitely indicates deeper workplace issues.

Maribel: Good for you for acknowledging this problem and for wanting to do something to handle this situation. How many people have dealt with an underperforming colleague by staying quiet and covering for [enabling] them, and then finally blowing up when they’ve had enough? That route rarely ends well.

The first thing I would ask you to do is to reserve judgment and to communicate early with your co-worker to try to figure out why they aren’t pulling their weight. Rather than laziness, there may be a personal issue or something else that might be pulling their attention away from work. Or, it might be that your co-worker doesn’t know how to do a particular task and needs training. If there is something going on, proactively offering to help your colleague might inspire them to respond more positively in future interactions.

Having tried that, you might have to take other approaches. Have team members talk about their roles and progress on projects during regular team meetings. Peer pressure can often go a long way—your co-worker may not want to be the only person not to report anything. You might also try directly asking your co-worker for help on specific aspects of projects, especially ones that fit in well with their interests and skills. Someone who is perceived as doing nothing might simply be unsure about what they can or should be doing. If specific needs and roles are defined, it might make it easier for your co-worker to find their own place.

You may also find yourself having to be more direct with your underperforming colleague. Try to do this before you get to a point where you might blow up. No one likes having these kinds of confrontations, but you might try approaching the conversation with a focus on how your colleague’s slacking is affecting you (“I’ve been really swamped with this project and don’t think I can handle these new things coming in, do you think you could help?”) rather than accusing your colleague (“Why don’t you do anything?”). Make the conversation more about collaboration than about contention. Assuming your co-worker isn’t out to harm you, this directness also may inspire some empathy from them.

If all else fails, you will eventually have to go to your supervisor. Again, rather than being a tattletale, approach the conversation with a focus on how this person’s slacking is affecting the team’s productivity. If your manager has been paying attention, it probably won’t be a surprise. However, it is still important for your manager to know, firsthand, from you, how it is affecting your work. Remain calm and explain what has been going on, and let your supervisor decide how to proceed. Best of luck!

Scott: Conversations involving the performance of a co-worker are uncomfortable at best and counter-productive at worst [if you lose your cool, you might find yourself in a weakened position due to a perceived lack of professionalism]. Many of us are conflict-averse, and the thought of having to approach a colleague about
their attitude or effort level is unpleasant enough that it seems easier to take on the extra work yourself just to avoid the conversation. While this might seem tempting, and may even work in the short term, I think that you know that it is untenable long term.

I agree wholeheartedly with the strategies laid out by Dolly and Maribel. Asking your colleague to assist you on joint projects, encouraging them by pointing out tasks that they do well, creating situations where team members report on the progress of various projects, or trying to identify and consider factors outside of work that might be contributing to your colleague’s work performance can all be effective techniques. I think of these as good, relatively low-impact ways to gently nudge your co-worker to put in a little more effort. Maybe it really is true that they just don’t realize how their own lack of effort affects the rest of the team.

If you are dealing with someone who truly does not have respect for the other members of the team, however, that’s a different issue entirely.

Speaking of something “not being your job,” it’s also not your job to have to figure out ways to cajole your colleagues into doing their work. There is a reason your supervisor gets paid more than you do—because they have the added headache of having to deal with issues just like this. A good supervisor will identify and deal with underperforming team members long before you have to enroll in Workplace Psychology 101. There’s certainly something to be said for being a professional by attempting to handle minor workplace issues on your own. Maybe you can even look at it as practice for your own future supervisory position. On some level, however, if you devote undue time and energy to dealing with the shortcomings of your colleagues, you’re taking on the responsibilities of the person whose actual job it is to motivate, coach, encourage, police, and discipline your colleague—their supervisor. So, feel free to take a swing at gently encouraging your colleague, but if that fails, it is not unreasonable to let your supervisor supervise.

Good luck with your workplace headache. And, between you and me, I think it’s pretty clear who the real star of the office is. The most important thing you can do is to keep doing your own work well. If you do that, I have no doubt that you will be rewarded in due time—both for your own output and for your high level of professionalism. ■