

Fun, Fearless

WORK

EDITED BY SARA AUSTIN

LEARN TO LOVE YOUR OFFICE NEMESIS

SHE'S IRRITATING, UNDERMINING, AND PRETTY MUCH THE WORST. SHE ALSO MIGHT HOLD THE SECRET TO YOUR SUCCESS.

BY PAULA DERROW

I tried to like her. After all, Ms. Ambitious, as I'll call her, was a star. Cheerleader-perky, she had a real office (with a door!), compared with my lowly cube, although her title wasn't more exalted. When the big boss came looking for Ms. A one afternoon and was told she wasn't in, she chortled, "What's the point in being here without her?" Not to be immature, but I wanted to barf.



If she can cope with Ron Burgundy, you can work with anyone.

EVERETT COLLECTION; BACKGROUND: GETTY IMAGES.

I'd always been a nose-to-the-grind-stone girl whose knack for words got me noticed. But after weeks of pitching ideas, I wasn't sure the boss knew my name.

So I was hopeful when Ms. A asked me out to lunch. But as she perkily grilled me over salad, it became clear she wasn't going to share any tips on how she snagged the best assignments. In 20 minutes flat, she managed to extract all she needed to know about me, every last insecurity, while giving up nothing.

A few weeks later, I pitched a project that finally got a green light. But I soon learned that Ms. A had a proposal of her own—with the same snappy title and premise. Despite my protests, Ms. A got the go-ahead to pursue *my* project. She secured her position as a rising star, while I remained invisible, fuming, far below.

From that day on, I despised my nemesis—her boundless energy, the way her tinkling laugh echoed across the department, and most of all, her willingness to do whatever it took to get ahead. There are a lot of us haters out there: Two-thirds of all employees say they've been the victim of social exclusion, undermining, gossip, and other bitchy office behavior, says Joe Labianca, PhD, a professor of management at the University of Kentucky. Another study found that interoffice rivalries were a factor in more than half of employee departures.

The situation isn't always fatal: If you're someone who can laugh off competition and see it as a game (“Ha! I'm going to win more accounts than you!”), having a rival can be motivating. You have to be sharper if someone is trying to sabotage you.

But if you're the type who personalizes clashes—as many women are—a nemesis can derail your career. “You get into a cycle where you're watching your nemesis, talking about her, worrying about her—you're so obsessed, it's almost as if you're in love with her,” says Lauren Zander, cofounder and chairman of the Handel Group, a coaching company. Except being in love is fun and energizing, and being stuck on your nemesis is definitely not.

I am not proud to admit how much I gossiped about Ms. A. I gazed at her through narrowed eyes during meetings, then snarkily recounted her annoying contributions afterward. “When you've been wronged, it's natural to try and rebalance the scales of justice by running around and getting others on your side,” says

Labianca. “But if your supervisor sees you as someone who spreads rumors, studies show that your career prospects plummet.” Plus, Zander notes, you force coworkers to take sides and work around each other, which creates all kinds of bad juju within the team.



Whether it's Broadway (*Glee*), the city council (*Parks and Recreation*), or a medical clinic (*The Mindy Project*), every workplace has mortal enemies.

It's all too easy to get swept up in negativity, as happened with Mia, a content strategist for a website. “My nemesis was in sales; I was in creative,” she recalls. “I felt like she was telling me how to do my job, constantly e-mailing suggestions and going behind my back to clients to present her ideas. We sat three seats apart, but instead of talking, we'd e-mail. Instead of doing my job, I put all my focus on her.”

To turn a draining, contentious work relationship into something healthy, you have to refocus your energy from your rival to yourself. “Think about what fears your nemesis's behavior is triggering,” says Katherine Crowley, psychotherapist and coauthor of *Mean Girls at Work*. Maybe the reason you're disgusted by relentless self-promoters is that you're not very good at schmoozing and getting yourself noticed.

Consider your unique skills. “I once worked with a client whose nemesis was a total flirt,” recalls Crowley. That wasn't the client's thing; instead, she gunned for projects that would use her amazing design sense, spearheading an event that got the attention of management. Whether it's your taste, humor, or technical skills, “if you're clear about what you have to offer, then you're not really competing with anyone else,” says Edward Vilga, a creativity coach and author of *Upward Dog*. “Playing to your strengths is the best way to get ahead.”

Of course, you still have to live with the annoying person who is hanging around while you clarify your dreams. Step one: Ask your nemesis to lunch. If it's a bust? “Do it again,” says Labianca. “One conversation with someone you hate will not set things right. It will be awkward.” Say, “Geez, it's so competitive here. I wish it wasn't like that. What do you think?”

You may discover that your nemesis is also struggling. “Often when you feel as if you're competing, it's because management is creating that dynamic,” says Labianca. “If you consider that you and your nemesis may not have much to do with the pattern you're in, you can depersonalize it and maybe learn to work together.”

When Mia's rival fell out of favor with her bosses, Mia saw it as karma. “But then I realized they were turning against her for specious reasons, and I found myself siding with her,” she says. Both women ended up leaving, not as soul mates but as friends who respected each other. “I feel like I missed an opportunity to collaborate and kick some serious butt,” Mia says.

I'd like to say I became besties with Ms. A, but no. What I did realize is that the big-company scene, where you have to resort to nefarious measures to be noticed, wasn't right for me. After a year, I found another, smaller place to work, one where I had an office of my own and plenty of juicy assignments. If there was someone getting more attention than me, I was too busy—and happy—to notice.

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