

Excessive niceness no recipe for success
Failing to assert yourself and your needs can create stress, resentment
among co-workers and career stagnation

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Saturday, July 19, 2008

Most of us have fallen into the niceness trap at least once -- perhaps apologizing for something that wasn't our fault, or taking on a time-sucking assignment we didn't have time for -- and later regretted it.

But those who overextend themselves habitually are likely on the fast-track to a crushing workload, terrible assignments and resentment -- not the career fast-track.

"Whenever we put the word 'too' in front of 'nice' -- right away it raises big flags for me," says Toronto career coach Shirin Khamisa. "What I've come to see in my own life, and in working with people, is that the more courageous you can be, ... the better you'll excel in whatever you're doing." Being savvy at work means being able to tell the difference between the right time to overextend yourself -- like when the company is severely short-staffed or when a great project presents itself -- and when to stick to your job description and your office hours. It also requires the ability to say no.

People who are unable to assert their needs and limitations can be vulnerable to burnout, which will ultimately sap you of both your energy and creativity, she adds. Being too accommodating becomes a damaging habit, says Khamisa. People may start to see you as the person they can unload projects on, and you may find yourself too busy to jump on career-building projects (or even notice them in the first place).

Your reputation may suffer in another way, says Victoria, B.C., career coach Michele Waters. Being overly nice may cause others to question your authenticity.

"I think it can lead to a lot of resentment. The messages become confusing, because when the person is overly nice, or a doormat, they're not honest about what they want," says Waters. "It's really hard for people to figure

out, 'What is this person doing or thinking?' " As a result, these people can be difficult to be around, despite their best intentions.

"They're kind of disruptive and dysfunctional people to be around, because they're usually quite self-absorbed." Fortunately, with some self-reflection, change is possible.

When you agree to a new workplace task, thoroughly assess how you feel about it, says Waters. If it's not good timing, or if you could modify it slightly to suit your schedule or skills, try to find a compromise. If it really doesn't work, don't be a martyr -- say no, even if it's after the fact.

Also be conscious of your choice of words. Never put yourself down or dismiss a compliment, and don't express excessive guilt after making an error -- other symptoms of excessive niceness.

According to Khamisa, change starts when you become aware of how you're interacting with others and can identify where you're overextending yourself and how you feel when you agree to something that isn't in your best interests. Begin developing your own criteria for deciding what works for you, and when to say no.

Khamisa has seen excessive niceness in both her male and female clients, but says women are more susceptible because of how they're socialized.

Waters agrees, but in her practice, middle-aged women struggle with it the most.

"Women have been trained to be nice and do things to please people, rather than themselves." But when many women reach their 40s and 50s, they experience divorces or life changes that remind them to put themselves first and be honest about their needs.

Fortunately, younger generations are figuring this out earlier, says Waters.

"I'm working with some clients in their 20s, early 30s. I see them speaking up so much more about what they want, and walking away if it's a bad fit."

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