

## Make it Work Q & A

# Office affair leads to work overload

**Coach Vera Held's verdict on difficult situations at work.**

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**Q: I had to leave my small office of seven staff because my married boss was having an affair with "Stella," the married office manager. The atmosphere was awful and the work Stella didn't get done got dumped on me and I was not being compensated.**

A: Good move on your part. This workplace environment is toxic and will undoubtedly become explosive once the disgruntled spouses get wind of the affair. And there is no glory in "working for free" unless you're just starting your career, building your reputation and your portfolio and/or are doing volunteer/not-for-profit work for a cause that you believe in. Working for free simply means you are allowing someone to take advantage of you. Further, being exposed daily to the ongoing affair itself is a downer.

**Q: I was telling "James," a good colleague of mine, a story about something that happened to me 15 years ago at work. We did not know each other then, nor was the story connected to him in any way. His response in the form of unsolicited advice was angry to the point of being hostile. I was disappointed in his behaviour.**

A: It sounds as if the story triggered something in James that remains unresolved or that caused him pain or difficulty in the past. Therefore, he over-reacted and responded personally and negatively to your retelling of an old story. As for giving unsolicited advice, this needs to be done with care. Often the actual content of the advice, albeit well-intentioned, is overshadowed by how someone gives feedback. Tone and word choice matter. If James has proven himself to be a good colleague, accept this one-off hostile behaviour and carry on as always. However, if you've seen this behaviour before and want to problem solve, you can re-address the issue to help James understand that his behaviour was inappropriate and unpleasant. In future you may want to set a reciprocal boundary where no unsolicited advice is given by either side.

**Q: I'm a laboratory technician and I'm good at what I do. The psychiatrist who is essentially the departmental boss talks down to all the staff including me. As he always upsets me, I don't attend the department meetings.**

A: This talk-down artist has a problem. But don't make it yours. Your avoidance strategy is flawed: you avoid him but you also miss out on the meetings, the information gained there, the departmental interaction and being with your peers. People who talk down to and about others aren't feeling particularly good about themselves. The sign of a truly healthy individual is someone who goes out of his/her way to include rather than exclude people regardless of rank, gender, status, knowledge and salary. Go to that next meeting and make a valuable contribution. No doubt your colleagues would love to have you there, participating and making a difference.

Vera Held ([www.veraheld.com](http://www.veraheld.com)) is a coach, facilitator, speaker, writer, PR consultant and the author of *How Not to Take it Personally*. Send your workplace questions to [vera@veraheld.com](mailto:vera@veraheld.com).