

Make it Work Q & A

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

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Q: I supervised a smart, trilingual engineer at our consulting firm. But he could only complete his work if he stayed until midnight. We tried everything to help him, including time management courses. Sadly, I had no choice but to fire him.

A: A bright light, this chap was clearly not suited to the particular demands of a highly time-sensitive consulting environment. There also could have been health or other personal issues that hindered him giving his undivided attention to his work. Good news: as a trained engineer, he has a gamut of transferrable workplace skills. No doubt he has landed in a work environment better suited to his skills, strengths and personality. The old adage "one size fits all" has never applied to the

workplace.

Q: I recently advised a new professional acquaintance who is also a new resident to Canada to join professional groups. I recommended this for her and her husband — they are both currently unemployed. I received an e-mail from her saying that although she appreciated my desire to help, she does not discuss personal matters, specifically, her husband.

A: She set a fair boundary and it will be easy for you to respect it. But carefully consider to whom you give business advice — and for free. So much business is done in Canada based on who you know. If we did an informal survey we would find many who were introduced to their current employer by a former boss, colleague, friend or neighbour. So for the new kid on the block, be it new to Canada, in career transition or reinvention, returning to work after maternity/ paternity leave or fresh out of school — get others to introduce you and to toot your horn. It helps to amplify the sound.

Q: I receive about 150 e-mails a day; 50 of those need my direct attention. On the approximate 100 that staff cc me on, I find that staff go back and forth but are not listening to each others' needs to complete projects. Frequently, I intervene and say, "Stop. No more e-mails. Get talking." Do other organizations have these same challenges?

A: Big time. Staff "throw stuff over the wall," get their positions across in e-mails and believe they've done their best. But this is a defensive strategy that ultimately backfires. Real workplace communication involves sharing information to meet mutual workplace goals, so dialogue that takes in the needs of all parties must happen. It can happen by e-mail if the desire to problem solve is there. However, voicemail is more personal as "a real voice" is harder to ignore but, again, many opt to text back a message rather than pick up the phone or meet in person. You're a terrific role model; you wisely intervene to get staff back on a productive track. More managers need to get people communicating through active listening and by asking questions to problem solve and accomplish tasks.

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