

[Issue 8](#)

[From the Editor](#)

[Women in Biz](#)

[Profiles](#)

[Work-Family Balance](#)

[Internet Marketing](#)

[Links](#)

[Contact Us](#)



Ask Jill

By Jill Kanter

Setting Limits

Dear Jill,

I'm a human resources manager at a small company, providing HR services to several departments. A newly hired peer doesn't seem to have the knowledge or experience to handle his job. He's swamped with work, and my boss has increasingly asked me to pick up his slack. At first, I assured her that I was very willing to help. However, my own workload is very large, and I don't want someone else's responsibilities "added on." How can I discuss this with my boss without seeming like I'm not a "team player?"

Thanks for your help,

Karen

Dear Karen,

You're in a truly sensitive situation. It sounds like there may have been a hiring mistake, and that you're handling the brunt of it. You need to stand up for yourself, but without pointing fingers at your co-worker or your boss.

Try letting empathy be your guide-it's an understandably difficult situation for you, but it's probably also uncomfortable for your co-worker and perhaps even your boss. Schedule a meeting with your manager to discuss how best to prioritize your current workload. Stress that you understand the current situation, and want to make the strongest contribution possible. Then explain that in taking on some of your peer's responsibilities, you're concerned that your own work may suffer-something that neither you nor your boss wants! Ask for her help in prioritizing your recently "expanded plate." If she asks for too much-and she probably will-be polite, but firm in communicating limits (e.g., "I can definitely get x, y, and z done, but if we add q, I don't think that we'll meet the deadline for x," etc.). Explain the work-related consequences of your being overloaded-concrete outcomes that are significant to you both. Avoid mentioning personal consequences such as missing family commitments or visits to the gym-your personal life is not the issue here. Suggest alternative solutions, which might meet both your needs (e.g., identifying what projects can be pushed to next quarter or accomplished through temporary resources, etc.).

Most importantly, stay positive and maintain your conviction that this will all work out-you may be amazed by what results!

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Managing Power Dynamics

Dear Jill,

I'm part of a technical support team, and our firm is undergoing a major merger. We've all been assured of job security, but there've been lots of rumors, and we're all feeling jittery. One of my peers is leading our team on a major project, and she's recently become very competitive. She's designed the whole project to showcase her own work! She facilitates every meeting, delivers every presentation, and when one of us is speaking, she often interrupts. Lately she's been taking over responsibilities that have already been assigned to other people. We all report to the same manager, but he's been traveling a lot to support the merger. Any ideas on how to improve this situation?

-Maureen

Dear Maureen,

Mergers have a way of heightening everyone's insecurities. When people fear any undesired change-especially losing their jobs-destructive attitudes often emerge, like "every employee for him/herself." Still, mature team members have learned the value of rising above dysfunctional behaviors, and it's situations like this that teach them how. Your peer needs to reign herself in, and you may be able to help her realize this.

Start by making one or two small requests for changes that you'd like. For example, explain that you'd like to gain more experience presenting on this topic, and ask to deliver one segment of an upcoming presentation. If she resists, provide some gentle feedback-almost always a first step before going to someone's manager. Try to keep it simple. Let her know that although you're pleased to be on the project, you're concerned about the lack of professionally challenging work. Emphasize that you appreciate her willingness to "carry the load," but that it can inhibit your ability to make a strong contribution. Your subtle message is that by providing opportunities for others to shine, she can showcase her own ability to develop people. If she truly wants to look good to higher ups-and who doesn't?-this may motivate her to share the limelight.

If her dominating behavior persists, I encourage you to speak to your manager. Be sure to inform him of the situation in a way that is respectful of your peer. Ask for advice on what you can do to create improvement, rather than asking him to intervene. After you've tried his suggestions, contact him again and provide an update. Finally, remember that this experience can have tremendous impact on your own leadership style, and in the future, your project team members may benefit greatly!

If you have a question about a leadership or team issue in the workplace, please write to AskJill@womenandbiz.com.

Jill Kanter is a management consultant, speaker and writer with expertise in leadership development, team effectiveness and organizational change. She brings a strong practical approach and highly developed intuition to projects incorporating executive coaching, team development, workplace improvement and career empowerment.

Jill has worked extensively with clients in large, dynamic organizations in the financial services, hospital, healthcare, telecommunications and high-tech industries, as well as institutions of higher education and a variety of non-profits. She founded her firm in 1990, after earning her Ed.M. from Harvard University. You can reach Jill at 617-469-0100 or jdk@jillkanter.com. For more information about Jill Kanter visit her website at www.jillkanter.com.

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