



Managing Yourself



How to Work with a Workaholic Colleague

You don't have to follow their lead. Here's how to set boundaries.
by **Melody Wilding**

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Your colleague is the first one in and the last one to leave. They volunteer to take on every additional task that comes your team's way and they respond to emails within minutes. They're working *all the time*, whether from the office or from home. In short? You're dealing with a workaholic.

While it's tough reporting to a workaholic boss, having a hard-driving peer who seems married to the job can be equally frustrating. If you've ever had a workaholic colleague, then you know how infectious the

secondhand stress can be: since they're putting in overtime, you feel compelled to do the same. Their urgency and ultra-responsiveness create more tasks and replies for you to deal with. The workaholic's behavior isn't just annoying — it can be downright damaging and affect your well-being for the worst, not only increasing your chances for burnout, but also reducing your creativity, productivity, and job satisfaction.

As layoffs and austerity measures hit companies across the globe, it's common for team members to jockey to prove their value and place on the team. But there's a difference between working hard and being emotionally dependent on your job. Motivation separates a coworker who's engaged from one who's obsessed. Workaholics feel an internal compulsion to give the business their all and can't "turn off." Instead, they think about professional matters off-hours, and at the expense of their personal life and relationships.

Dealing with a workaholic colleague can be challenging, but there are steps you can take to mitigate the negative effects of their behavior on yourself and your team.

Depersonalize their actions.

While it's tempting to assume that your colleague is overworking in an attempt to outshine you, this is a classic example of a cognitive bias known as the fundamental attribution error. In social psychology, this refers to the tendency humans have to attribute another person's actions to their character or personality, while attributing our own behavior to external or situational factors that are outside our control.

In other words, your colleague is probably not overworking to intimidate or one-up you. Debias your thinking by considering other reasons for their behavior. For example, perhaps your colleague is going

through something personally and is throwing themselves into work as an escape. Or maybe they are reacting to a past workplace trauma.

Avoid glorifying the behavior.

Avoid giving praise when a result is obviously due to overworking. If you know your colleague stayed up all night creating a presentation, for example, complimenting their sacrifice can be counter-productive. Similarly, the next time your colleague complains about how they're completely swamped, don't affirm them by saying, "Wow, you've really been going the extra mile," which only reinforces their workhorse mentality.

Pay attention to your own behavior to ensure it doesn't enable your colleague's workaholic ways as well. It may be convenient for you to clear your inbox on a Saturday afternoon, but consider scheduling your messages to go out on Monday instead, so that you don't get into a weekend of email ping-pong. Keep investing in your own efforts to create balance for yourself. Positive role modeling could give your colleague permission to take care of themselves as well.

Resist peer pressure.

Guilt can leave you susceptible to falling into the same patterns as your counterpart. You may start comparing your capacity and output to theirs and wonder, "Am I really working hard enough?" Before you begin overextending yourself in an effort to "catch up," mind your mindset and be aware of extremist thinking. You're not lazy or irresponsible if you don't attend an 8 p.m. call and your colleague does, for instance. Taking time off for self-care isn't indulgent, rather it's a prerequisite for your performance.

If your colleague passive aggressively snipes, "It must be nice not to do XYZ," you can say "Yes, it is. I see a lot of people assume they need to

work around the clock, but I don't do that, and it's benefited me in ABC ways. A lot of pressure goes away when you don't buy into the idea that hustling is better."

Set boundaries.

Workaholics tend to have few boundaries. They may bend over backwards to accommodate last-minute changes and struggle to say no to requests. You'll need to play defense by managing expectations around response times and your availability. Let's say your colleague asks you to turn around a project brief in less than 24 hours. You can push back and explain, "That's not possible. If you have this sort of task in the future, I'll need at least a three day's notice to work it into my schedule." You might also advocate for better systems and processes that eliminate the need for excess effort.

When you begin to set boundaries, your colleague may be upset or resist at first. That's normal and it means your efforts are working. Stand your ground, stay the course, and enforce consequences if you must.

Finally, remember to adjust your perspective on productivity. While it may be tempting to gauge your daily success based on the number of hours you work, it's the quality of work you deliver that matters most. Being good at your job doesn't mean working more — it means producing results.

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