

[Issue 10](#)

[Family Business](#)

[Women in Biz](#)

[Profiles](#)

[Ask Jill](#)

[Technology](#)

[Links](#)

[Contact Us](#)



Ask Jill

By Jill Kanter

Self-Preservation in a Toxic Work Environment

Hi Jill,

I'm self-employed and recently accepted a long-term contract position as part of an onsite product development team. The project is very interesting, and it's a great opportunity to earn some steady income. The problem is the people. Several of my teammates are very negative, and I'm surrounded by complaining and back-biting. Nothing is directed at me personally, but I'm finding it hard to work in this environment. Lately I dread going in, and am considering leaving the project. Do you have any suggestions? I really want to stay on board.

Thanks, Brenda

Dear Brenda,

It seems like you've found a very good professional opportunity, that unfortunately comes at the expense of your own well-being. You need to identify how best to take care of yourself in this challenging situation. It's unlikely that you can change your colleagues' attitudes and behaviors, but there are steps you can take to improve your experience of working with them. I suggest that you frame this situation as an opportunity to become stronger within yourself. This will help you to remain objective and to be less influenced by those around you. Here are a few suggestions to support your success:

- Establish a strong, positive inner attitude. You don't need to become "Polly Anna," broadcasting to teammates how great everything is. You just need to build a refuge within yourself to support your own peace of mind. This may require great effort on your part, but it's critical to survival in a toxic work environment.
- Try to maintain a neutral view of any "negative person" from the moment he or she begins to annoy you. It's very easy to become judgmental in this kind of situation—and that can be a tremendous liability. When your own mind becomes polluted with angry or resentful thoughts, soon you can be perceived as the one with the attitude problem.

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- Try to relax. When someone speaks negatively, our tendency can be to tense up and absorb their toxic energy. Instead, try this simple exercise: imagine that your body has become a window screen with thousands of tiny holes, and then allow their words to flow right through you.
- Immerse yourself in uplifting reading, CDs and tapes at lunch and on breaks—anything that helps you to feel inspired. This can be your most powerful protection in a negative atmosphere.
- Keep a daily journal to record your challenges, frustrations and fears—as well as your hopes and positive experiences. Writing can both release stress and bring great peace of mind.
- Make exercise part of your daily routine—even when you're really busy—a walk around the block or even the parking lot can be tremendously refreshing.

Also keep in mind that in a highly toxic work environment, sometimes the best decision is to leave. If you try these suggestions, and still dread going in, it may be time to give your notice. It can be very helpful to make decisions like this with input from trusted friends (outside the work environment). Most important, remember to take very good care of yourself—with this focus, you can't go wrong!

Resilient Response to Workplace Embarrassment

Dear Jill,

I was recently being considered for a promotion to head my department, but lost out to someone who was hired from outside the organization. This person has a lot of management experience, and will probably be a good leader for our group. I've been feeling self-conscious as many people know that I was being considered for the position. I can come to terms with working for my new manager, but I need help in getting over the embarrassment of publicly "not having made the grade."

I appreciate your thoughts on this,

Denise

Dear Denise,

I think that every reader can relate to your experience. We've all been rejected at one time or another—but may not have handled it with the same degree of maturity that you're demonstrating. I'm impressed by your ability to see your new manager's strengths, as well as your willingness to develop a good working relationship. This is usually what people find most difficult!

After working with many clients in similar circumstances, I can assure you of three things:

1. People's reactions to another person's seeming failure tell much more about them (and their own self-esteem) than about the person being judged.
2. Most of us are so self-obsessed, we forget about anything that's happened to anyone else within a very short timeframe.
3. The more resilient you are, the better for everyone—especially yourself!

Self-consciousness is the result of over-focus on how (we believe) we're being viewed by others. When you notice that you're feeling self-conscious, try to shift your attention outward to those around you—to be “the seer,” not “the seen.” Strike up a conversation with someone by asking a question about his or her work. You'll naturally begin to relax as you focus on the other person's response.

It's also very important to be aware of your own self-talk—what you're telling yourself internally about what's happened. Negative self-talk can produce anxiety and psychosomatic reactions like headaches and muscle tension. Positive self-talk, however, can encourage desirable results, such as increased confidence and feelings of well-being. When you find yourself repeating negative inner messages, try to let go of them immediately, and substitute more powerful positive thoughts. Here's an example that might hit home:

Negative Self-Talk: “*Everyone* knows that I interviewed for that job. They're probably coming up with all kinds of reasons for why I wasn't selected.”

Positive Self-Talk: “I'm really proud that I applied for that job. It shows that I'm ambitious and willing to take a risk. Now I'm demonstrating that I can handle rejection, and that's got to be impressive to senior management.”

Chances are, as you develop allegiance to your new manager, your self-consciousness will begin to fade. It also probably won't be too long before someone else in the department experiences something embarrassing, and this can provide great perspective! Hang in there, Denise—you're setting a great example for all of us.

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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