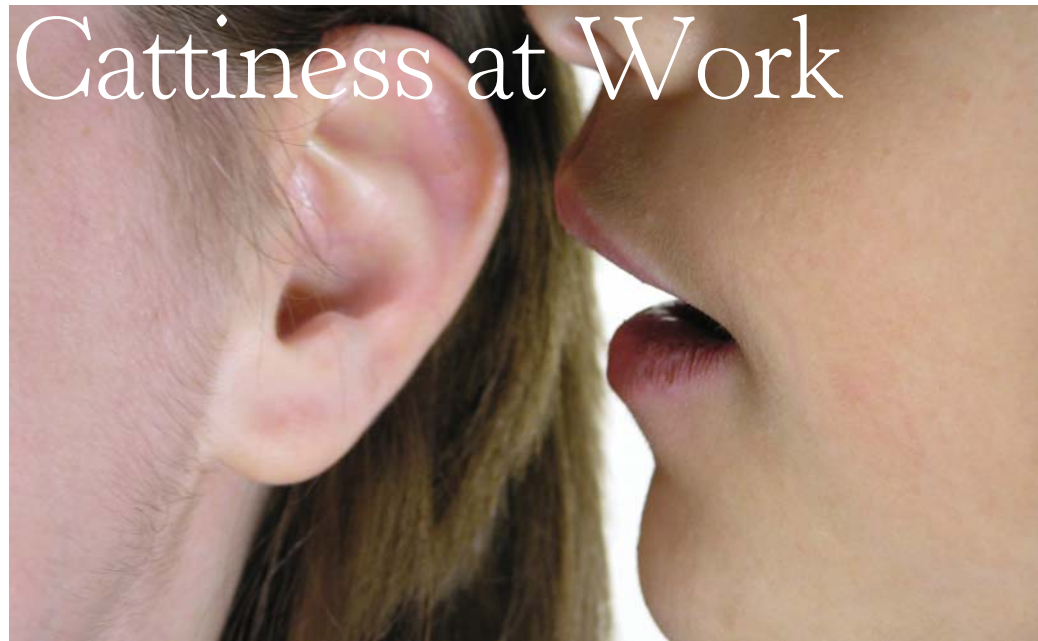


DE-CLAWING Cattiness at Work



Few things destroy your peace of mind or the morale of a team quicker than a catty person does. When we think about catty behavior we usually think of women, but make no mistake about it, men can show their claws, too. In fact, the cattiest person I

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ever worked with was a tomcat CEO who purred, clawed and hissed his way to the top. Our entire office suffered from a severe case of cat scratch fever.

Simply put, catty behavior is mean-spirited nastiness intentionally meant to hurt or harm someone else's professional and emotional well-being.

Do you recognize any of these catty people?

- The conniving and spiteful backstabber
- The ice cold sniper who innocently smiles while she rips out your guts in front of your co-workers
- The clam who says everything is "fine" when she is obviously angry or upset
- The political bully who shrewdly sabotages your work
- The gossiper who delights in spreading malicious tales
- The queen who reigns over a snooty clique of followers

What's the big secret catty people don't want you to know? Catty behavior is just indirect aggression. It's a cowardly power play. Underneath their uppity façade and righteous justification, they are really scaredy cats. Catty people are afraid to confront you in a respectful, open and direct manner. Instead, they launch roundabout

attacks designed to diminish your emotional well-being and "even the score." By undermining or hurting you, they build up their own sense of self-esteem and power. In their mind, their actions are justified.

Why are women more prone to catty behavior?

Scientific studies have proven that under stress the desire to affiliate or "tend and befriend" is much higher in women than in men. This biological and psychological phenomenon leads to women placing a much higher importance on workplace relationships. Women turn to other women for support and safety in times of crisis and stress. Many times this expectation for support is assumed and not clearly communicated. When the support is not given as expected, a woman can feel betrayed and hurt by her female co-worker, causing her to

lash out at other people.

Another key factor that leads to catty behavior in women is the Power Dead-Even Rule. Pat Heim and Susan Murphy discovered this rule and provide an excellent description of it in their book, *In the Company of Women: Turning Workplace Conflict into Powerful Alliances*. As described by Drs. Heim and Murphy, the Power Dead-Even Rule is an invisible natural law that operates behind the scenes and helps to shape the way women react to each other.

For a relationship between two women to be positive, both women must perceive that the power and the self-esteem of each woman are equal or "dead even" to the other. This expected balance of power stretches across organizational hierarchies and positions of authority. When one woman believes her power or self-esteem is less than another woman's power or self-

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 30)

power in the workplace

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 28

esteem, she may use indirect aggression to re-balance the power and self-esteem. Examples of indirect aggression include:

- Telling lies and spreading rumors behind someone's back
- Stomping off and sulking
- Snubbing someone
- Using "nice" words with a "nasty" tone of voice
- Clamming up and refusing to talk when upset
- Planting damaging information or insinuations about someone
- Taking revenge by sabotaging someone's work
- Destroying property
- Shunning or ostracizing a specific person
- Refusing to include someone in a group activity like going to lunch
- Refusing to make eye contact
- Pretending the other person doesn't exist
- Making faces or derogatory gestures to others about a specific person

The "Who does she think she is?" syndrome

A perceived imbalance in the Power Dead-Even Rule between two women often leads one woman to unconsciously or, perhaps consciously, say, "Who does she think she is?" - a red-hot warning signal for catty behavior.

The "Who does she think she is?" syndrome often shows up between female bosses and employees. If the female employee feels like her power and self-esteem is not "dead-even" with her boss's power and self-esteem, she may quietly sabotage her boss's work and reputation to

make her female boss look bad in front of others. And a female boss may try to gain power and self-esteem by engaging in gossip about certain employees or refusing to make eye contact.

Stopping a catfight

Since catty people don't have the courage to directly and respectfully confront you, they love surprise attacks. Before you even know what is happening, you are sucked into a catfight. Once you take the attack personally, it's a downward spiral.

Nine secrets for stopping and avoiding a catfight:

1. Don't take the bait. Watch for your own "Who does she think she is?" response. A fight takes at least two people. If you don't react with hurt, anger or retaliation, there is no fuel for the fight.

2. Identify the pay-off. What is the other person trying to gain by indirectly attacking you? Does she need to increase her self-esteem by ridiculing the way you dress and undermining your self-esteem? Does she feel more powerful when she can get you upset or angry? What is her pay-off?

3. Don't reward the catty behavior. With no pay-off, the person doesn't gain anything by the behavior. The motivation disappears.

4. Be respectful, open and direct. Talk your truth. Counter the attack with a simple and respectful statement that puts a spotlight on the offending behavior:

"When you said you liked my dress, your tone of voice sounded condescending. I feel confused. What did you really want to say?"

5. Don't be distracted by the denial. Cattiness is indirect aggression so be prepared for the other person to deny that anything is wrong. Remember that they are afraid to be direct, open and honest with you. They prefer to hide in the shadows. If they own their behavior, they must also own responsibility for the impact of their behavior.

6. State what you want in the relationship. "I want us to be able to work together in a positive and respectful way. When you spread lies about me, it's hard for me to respect you."

7. Ask a powerful, forward-focused question. "What needs to be different so we can work together in a positive and respectful way?"

8. Be patient, diligent and consistent. Don't get discouraged if the catty behavior continues to occur. It takes time and consistency to stop it for good. The strongest behaviors are those that have been intermittently rewarded. If you inadvertently reward the catty behavior it will strengthen and continue. If you consistently deny the pay-off, the behavior will eventually stop.

9. Water and nurture the relationship. Catty behavior occurs when there is a perceived imbalance in power and self-esteem. Look for opportunities to respectfully and authentically build up the other person's self-esteem and power. ■

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