

Arrogance in the Workplace

Understanding its root cause

BY MAZIE LEFTWICH, PSY.D.



DEAR DR. MAZIE,

I am so annoyed by a coworker that I could scream. This woman is so arrogant – always right, always giving instructions. She’s not anyone’s boss, but she acts like she runs the show. This isn’t the first time I’ve had to deal with this. Why do folks act this way? It’s a real turn-off.

Kenna in Florida



A nationally recognized speaker and trainer, Mazie has a clinical background in applied psychology with expertise in organizational and personal development. She is Senior Vice President of Contract Land Staff, LLC, where she oversees training and team excellence programs.

When a coworker, supervisor or professional acquaintance displays arrogance, most of us find it difficult to relate to them. We can barely tolerate them. Arrogance is not only frustrating to confront, but it makes it nearly impossible to facilitate a change in the other person. It’s important that you ask yourself why they are acting that way. Do they really think there is a benefit in acting superior to others? Let’s do a little psychological analysis to understand more about it.

Arrogance is actually a defense mechanism used subconsciously as a way to prevent further criticism. Let’s take an individual that had a terrible childhood and felt betrayed by their parents. To cover this hurt, they may have developed a deep distrust for others as well as an arrogant demeanor in order to protect themselves from a further sense of betrayal. Just think about how lonely this person’s life is. Never trusting others or letting anyone get close.

In general, many arrogant people are actually covering up for what used to be called an inferiority complex. Their lives are being controlled by their emotions, guiding them to act in such a way that makes them feel better. It can be from neglect, abuse, abandonment, betrayal, or other such powerful emotional traumas. Whatever the cause, a deep wound remains. And strange as it may seem, they may have buried the trauma so deep within their psyche that they don’t consciously think of it. They may be totally out of touch with the depth of

their wounds and have absolutely no clue as to how they are coming across to others.

On the other hand, there are also people who know they are acting arrogantly and feel good about it. These folks like feeling superior to others and go out of their way to prove that they are always right, always the smartest and always in charge. They are singularly focused, and their actions feed a desire to see themselves as superior. They like the feeling that comes with intimidating, scaring and pushing others around. I consider it a sophisticated form of bullying. And the more they get away with it, the more superior they feel. They’re unpleasant to work with, and if they happen to be your boss, you will likely find your job distasteful. According to the Gallup Poll, the number one reason why people leave their job is because of a bad manager.

The best way to deal with someone’s arrogance is to recognize that there is an underlying reason for their behavior. As they work to hide their feelings of inferiority, realize that their behavior is simply a cover-up. They keep telling themselves how great they are, but everyone else can see through to those vulnerabilities they are working so hard to hide. This may sound odd, but as soon as you understand that there is a deeply wounded person behind that arrogance, the easier it will be to deal with them. It doesn’t mean working with them will necessarily become pleasant. But the more you understand what motivates a person, the better you will be equipped to respond.