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HOW TO STOP UNINTENTIONALLY SABOTAGING YOURSELF AT WORK

WE ALL HAVE SELF-DEFEATING BEHAVIORS THAT CAN PREVENT US FROM REACHING OUR GOALS. HERE'S HOW TO SPOT THEM AND CHANGE THE WAY WE WORK.

BY LYDIA DISHMAN

Here's a simple truth, according to Tamara Jacobs: "If you don't ask, you most likely won't get."

Jacobs, a [communications coach and image adviser](#) whose clients have included frontrunners in the current presidential election race and C-suite executives of Pfizer, Johnson & Johnson, Bayer, Amgen, and Novartis, among others, has spent over 20 years helping people get what they want. By teaching the importance of presentation and personal branding to others, Jacobs herself has learned a lot. She believes otherwise bright and competent people don't always get what they want because they self-sabotage through conditioned, defensive, and self-destructive behaviors.

Jacobs's latest book, *Your Ultimate Success Plan*, takes a deeper dive into the stumbling blocks we unwittingly put in our own way as we build our careers. Jacobs contends that, at times, both women and men have the "Cinderella complex," in which its victims wait to be rescued instead of taking an active role in their success. Or they could be insecure enough to bury their authentic selves in favor of presenting a front that is more "likeable." And let's not forget the complainers who just want to whinge instead of work towards a goal, or the passive-aggressive "sharers," or those who are overly modest.

Jacobs argues that no matter what flavor of poison they are drinking, the common ingredient in the Kool-aid is that they aren't taking control of their situation. "Too much is either left to chance, with power abdicated, or put in the hands of others," Jacobs maintains.

For those who want to upend their sabotaging behaviors, Jacobs offers the following, sometimes counterintuitive strategies.

CINDERELLA HAD A FAIRY GODMOTHER, YOU DON'T

In the workplace, the fairy godmother character is easy to spot: The senior executive who takes a talented newbie under her wing. Jacobs notes that while many companies invest heavily in mentoring programs, she believes these mutually enabling relationships can break down and cause big problems. Even when they're operating in reverse, as Jack Welch mandated a decade ago that his top executives seek mentors among the more youthful rank and file.

INSTEAD OF RELYING ON ONE CORPORATE FAIRY GODPERSON, BUILD A NETWORK OF ADVISERS AND CREATE A SPHERE OF INFLUENCE.

One example is the boss who also acts as a mentor to his next in command. If the boss gets fired and a new person comes in who isn't so enamored with the executive he inherited, things can go downhill pretty quickly.

Instead of relying on one corporate fairy godperson, Jacobs advises, build a network of advisors. Creating a sphere of influence is a better plan. "It is also important that these spokespeople have no direct authority over your area or supervisory responsibilities," she cautions. This group should be available to consult with occasionally, and if one or two move on, you can still draw on the expertise and support of the others.

SAY WHAT YOU MEAN

"In a world dominated by political correctness (or fear of unemployment)," Jacobs writes, "we often feel compelled to sugarcoat or backpedal our thoughts and ideas." Comfort is a sought-after prize, so why rock the boat, she posits. "If you don't put yourself out there, you won't be rejected, but you won't be accepted either," she says.

In an age where more organizations are tossing aside the annual review in favor of increased feedback, Jacobs points out that most bosses don't like dissent. But a culture of honest communication isn't easy to achieve. The problem is that by crushing conflicting arguments, you're in danger of crushing your career potential.

The problem is that we can't just boldly share our thoughts without regard to how they will be received. Jacobs offers an elegant solution. Yes, you can say what you mean, but first, think hard about what outcome you'd like to achieve. "I've discovered people have a much higher tolerance for constructive tension than you think," she observes.

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With that in mind, Jacobs recommends editing your words for blame and emotional reaction. "No one is going to want to listen to you if you play the blame game aimed at people inside or outside the room," she says, "You always want to deal with the situation, not the person." Instead of pointing fingers and threatening to call foul, she suggests using the word "we," as in, "We've anticipated contingencies and the achievement of seamless rollout may be more complex than we originally anticipated. We need to look at . . ."

This editing should also come into play when we want to point out a trait in our colleagues that we may find annoying or hard to work with. Just blurting out an observation can come across as unnecessarily mean. Jacobs offers this example: "You always have to be right," turns into, "I appreciate how concerned you are about me falling on my face, but sometimes you need to let me experience that painful face plant."

DON'T BE INVISIBLE

We've seen how much stock some highly placed executives put in the power of good karma to advance a career. Jacobs is of a different mind-set entirely. Her mission statement to those who prefer not to toot their own horn and believe that hard work will win the day (or the raise/promotion) is simple: "Let go of fear and negotiate from a position of strength."

She, like many others, recognizes the difficulty inherent in asking for what we feel like we are worth. Fear of rejection is a big factor, as is minimizing your own needs.

To minimize the fear factor and take the awkwardness out of the conversation, Jacobs offers the following advice to define the anatomy of a W.I.N.:

- **W—What do I want and what do I get?**
- **I—Intel around other Internal and external candidates (what do they want?)**
- **N—Need to identify and commit to resistance points (what are my limits?)**

With that structure in mind, Jacobs advises against waiting for the other party to make an offer and negotiating from that. "By making the offer first," she says, "You establish the baseline that will determine the entire arc of the conversation."

She also reminds potential negotiators that no doesn't mean never. "If you free yourself from the outcome of your negotiation, then you've let go of the shame associated with a no," she states. Be persistent, Jacobs advises, and stay after those who've said no.

Finally, Jacobs underscores, "Please don't think life is going to give you what you want when you want it." But by becoming aware of self-limiting behaviors, she says, "You can make way for more of the good."