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## Peer Pressure

**IT teams often bypass management and deals with slacking co-workers themselves.**

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Network World, 03/19/01

In a former job, Bala Nair once had a new co-worker who just wasn't getting with the program. Other team members were working overtime and mopping up after the newbie, who was talented but had never before worked in a structured environment. The morale of the five-member team was suffering, says Nair, who's now a senior architect at Intranets.com in Woburn, Mass.

Sounds like a job for management, right? Wrong. Rather than bring the situation to a supervisor, Nair's team asked the group leader to "sit down with the person and say, 'In order to fit with the team, here's what you need to do.'" After several meetings with the leader over four months, that worker became a productive contributor. "It was a bit like teaching manners to an unruly puppy," Nair says.

Everybody's experienced a dead-weight co-worker or two. These slackers may get by with charm, or they may simply stonewall. If their managers fail to improve their performance, experts say you need to address the problem head-on.

A network administrator at a midsized Ohio company, who requested anonymity for herself and her employer, remembers a 1999 hire "who just sat in his cube . . . he wouldn't do anything."

Today, when employers can't hire network professionals fast enough and struggle to retain them, such co-workers are an unpleasant fact of life. Moreover, increased emphasis on self-directed teams makes it easier for loafers to slip under management's radar, says Christopher Rotolo, a partner at consulting firm Behavioral Insights.

### Take charge of the situation

If managers don't pick up on the problem, it's usually up to the peer group to straighten out colleagues. Lena West, president of xynoMedia Development, a human resources and technology consultancy, says, "Managers need to be involved only when there's sexual harassment or [a similarly serious issue], not just when so-and-so's not pulling his weight."

In Nair's situation, his former employer strongly emphasized teams, which is why the group leader, rather than a manager, was chosen to discuss the problem with the co-worker whose work wasn't up to par. Contrast that approach with the Ohio network administrator who kicked the problem upstairs. She says the slacker's busy manager blew off the situation. Other co-workers, hesitant to confront their colleague, simply absorbed his work - and resented him.

Nair's team made the right decision in electing a single representative to meet with the co-worker. "You want to make sure the person doesn't get that ganged-up-on feeling," Rotolo says.

When beset by a group, West says, the first thing that occurs to the aggrieved party is, " 'All of you talked about me behind my back.' This destroys trust."

If you draw the short straw, you might want to make notes and enter the meeting with a list of points. That's because it's easy to forget what you wanted to discuss, especially if your co-worker turns emotional or belligerent.

Experts say you should also bring an open mind. "I go in with the idea that I may be wrong," West says. "If you think you're right, you won't be willing to see the other point of view."

The first goal is to determine the cause of the problem. If you go in with the attitude that your colleague is a professional loafer, you may miss signals pointing to insufficient training, or a health or family issue. So you're there with your list and your open mind. Experts say the actual discussion should draw from basic management techniques for offering feedback.

Make that feedback as specific as possible. "You don't say, 'You always do this,' or 'You have a bad attitude,'" Rotolo says. "You'd say something like, 'In project X, you had this deadline. You didn't meet that deadline, and when you did finish, your project was buggy.'"

You should also frequently point out that the behavior is harming the team. Once again, use details. You might point out that other members of the group have worked excessive overtime, or that a poorly executed project that can be traced to the coworker in question was mentioned in your performance review.

Once you've had your say, don't expect miracles. Your co-worker may grow sullen or lash out. In such cases, experts say, you should gently but doggedly return to the specific concerns on your list. If the co-worker does come around and admit that he has been slacking, be prepared to help correct the situation. Once again, specifics are important.

For example, Rotolo says, "If [your co-worker is] going through a divorce, maybe you make an informal contract. . . . Tell him the rest of the team will cover for him for a certain period of time, but spell out the consequences if he doesn't get it together after that."

Of course, sometimes nothing works and you cross your fingers. In the case of the slacker at the Ohio company, "he quit after his first performance review," his former co-worker says. "Thank God."

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