A person with long hair

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*Ask the Coach*

“My co-worker won’t stay in their own lane.”

October 17, 2021

Well hello Friends! Welcome to this bonus episode of “Ask the Coach.”

This is something I started a couple of month ago and I promised I’d do it every month or two. And it’s been a few months since the first one, so I thought we’d do another one.

If you recall, for these episodes, I do some specific coaching based on questions you submit.

So, for future episodes, if you’re struggling with something at work or if you have a question about anything else related to your career or life, send me a DM on Instagram or email me at [carla@thepurposefulcareer.com](mailto:carla@thepurposefulcareer.com). It’s always anonymous. I just use the initials of the person who submitted the question.

So, today’s question comes from TJ. And she says:

*Dear Carla,*

*I’ve got this colleague who just won’t stay in his lane.*

*We have to work together on big projects and initiatives and that shouldn’t be a problem. We each have our own role (supposedly). But the truth is, when we work together, he just won’t stay in his own lane. He often doesn’t deliver on his own area’s responsibilities on time and instead, he’s all up in MY business. He’s always wanting to work on my things together or giving me his ideas or talking over me in meetings. I’ve even heard him overtly take credit for the work I’ve done. It’s not just me. Others tell me they see what’s going on and honestly, I’m at my wit’s end. I can’t deal with him anymore. I’m so angry with him that I’m afraid of what I might say. And I’m also afraid that while I’ve got my head down trying to get my work done, he’s out there taking credit for it all. And I’m afraid of the implications that’s going to have on my future at this company. Plus, it’s just not fair.*

*So, my question to you is this. How can I get my colleague to stay in his own lane?*

*Thanks a lot.*

*TJ*

Well TJ, before we get into the coaching, I just want to say…I FEEL you.

YEARS ago, like 13 years ago, I had almost the exact same issue. So, I know the very real and very negative impact this type of thing can have on you.

And I’ll say that at the time, I didn’t handle it as well as I would’ve liked. At the time I felt like I’d tried everything, talking to him, talking to our mutual boss, ignoring it. And it drove me so insane, I ended up quitting a job I really loved and taking one I didn’t love so much.

So, when you’re in a situation like this, it’s important to be clear about what’s going on and what you can and can’t control in this situation. That’s when you can be sure you’re operating from the best place…the place that’s going to serve you.

So, let’s get into it.

**First**, based on what you shared; the situation is that there are role clarity issues between the two of you. Whether they’re happening because those roles aren’t well-defined or whether it’s because your colleague is acting this way on purpose for motivations of his own, I don’t know based on the information you shared.

But the first thing I want you to see is that there’s a difference between the situation or circumstance and your thoughts.

So here, the situation is that your colleague is doing your work. So, whether it’s about role clarity or role overlap or whatever, that’s the fact of what’s happening. You’re both trying to do the SAME job.

The second thing I want you to know is that EVERYTHING ELSE you shared in that paragraph are YOUR thoughts about the situation. Specifically, what you’re making that mean about him, about you and about your future with the company.

There are several points I want to make before we get into what you can do.

First, let’s start with the question you asked and that was:

“How can I get my colleague to stay in his own lane?”

The short answer is you can’t.

What I want you to notice is that in asking “how can I get my colleague so stay in how own lane” you’re basically asking me some things you can do to CONTROL or CONVINCE or MAKE your colleague do what you think he SHOULD be doing.

That never works. We can’t control other people.

Intellectually, we all know this, but it can be easy to forget that. Especially when you believe you’re in the right.

So, my first advice to you is, let go of that thought. You can’t “get him” to do anything.

What you CAN do is shift your focus to the thing you CAN control, which is YOU. The quality of the thing you deliver, the timeliness of when you deliver it and the effectiveness with which you sell that thing in.

You can empower yourself to do that by letting go of the “getting him to do” stuff thought and shifting into a YOU-focused thought that will put you at your most powerful. Maybe something like:

“This is going to be my best accomplishment yet.” Or

“I’ve got great ideas for how to tackle this initiative.” Or even something like

“I’m going to do the best work of my career on this.”

See how with these thoughts, you’ve shifted from stewing about and worrying about HIM and the fear-based implications of what you were afraid it might all mean to instead, focusing on what YOU can and want to do.

This is what I mean by shifting your thoughts, it not to the positive then at least to neutral. You’re bringing your focus back to center. Back to YOU.

And when you do that, all those thoughts behind the thoughts (I call them thought clusters) go away.

The things you were focused on like “I’m afraid he’s taking credit for it all” or “I’m afraid what this will mean for my career” go away when you shift your focus from OTHERS to YOURSELF and what YOU want to and CAN do.

So those new thoughts are going to make you feel something like “determined” or “focused.“ And when you feel this way, you’re going to probably do your best work. Because you’re thinking about the work and the ideas and you’re not wasting your time worrying about what HE is doing. Or why he’s doing it. Or how it’s going to affect you.

If you keep all your focus on him, you’ll not only stay rooted in those fear thoughts. You’re going to stay in blaming and victim mode and overwhelm which came up in the thoughts you shared like “I’m at my wit’s end” and “I can’t deal with him anymore.”

Those statements aren’t true, though I get that they FEEL true. You’re not at your wit’s end. You’re just telling yourself things that have got you at the edge of the emotional cliff. And you CAN deal with him. Just on YOUR terms.

My advice here is to:

Stop thinking of HIM. Shift your focus to YOU and what YOU want to accomplish with this effort.

This is going to ensure you do your best work and deliver the best outcome on time.

But that doesn’t mean you have to just ignore what you perceive is bad behavior. The key here is to point out or question his actions IN THE MOMENT. Keep it fact-based so he’s not on the defensive. And don’t let if escalate.

For example, if he tries to interrupt you again, simply jump in and say. “I’d like to finish my thought please.” And then continue on with your point. Do that enough, he’ll get the point.

If he suggests or simply tries to jump in and do the work with you, you might consider saying “Thanks, but I’ve got this pretty far along. It’ll move faster if we each work on our part of the deliverable separately. If you want, we can meet later this week to compare notes.”

This is an attempt to create “space” around you.

The intention here is to gently create space between your roles by tactfully pointing out that you BOTH have different deliverables and that they’re both needed to complete the effort. But it also offers up a little collab between meetings that serves as an olive branch.

Because the thing about role clarity is that it can create perception issues.

If we push too hard for lane definition, we can come off like we don’t play well with others.

Or that we’re not great collaborators.

It might not be fair, but we should be aware that it’s at least a risk.

So, when you’re trying to create that “space” around you, offering up that olive branch softens it a little by letting the person know that you’re open to working closely together. But that you still want a little division in the work.

Last piece of advice is to take note of facts. If the behavior continues despite your efforts to create space or if you feel like it’s having a negative impact on perception of YOU, you might want to consider taking it to your mutual boss. But when you do, be fact-based, specific and keep the emotions and victim and blaming out of it. Just keep it based on how his behavior is impacting your team, or keeping you from delivering on time or whatever you think the fact-based implications are.

The main thing is to stay focused on what YOU can control and do. And that’s the contribution you make or the work you do.

The truth is that role clarity issues happen. Some organizations are so matrixed, it’s hard to clearly define who does what. So, if that is the truth in your organization, your best answer if you want to stay there, is to keep your thoughts focused on YOU, not him. On the contribution YOU want to make. On how YOU want to show up and be perceived and all of that.

At the end of the day, sometimes we just can’t get past these things. I know. I’ve been there. But my advice to you would be to make that decision from a clean space meaning, ask yourself if this is a job that is going to get you where you want to go. If the answer is no long yes, then put all of your attention on finding the BEST next step for you. Don’t simply run to something that you don’t really want just to escape a colleague who won’t stay in his own lane.

I wish you the best of luck, TJ. You’re got this.

Join us on Sunday for our regular weekly episode. If you like the podcast, be sure to give us a rating or a review. That helps us reach more people with this coaching approach and that’s what we’re all about.

Until next time, make it a great week my friends.