

Help! Save My Career!

by Donald Asher, America's Job Search Guru

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Dear Guru Don:

My work life has turned into a Jerry Springer episode. I'm waiting for the cameras to come out! In all seriousness, my "teammate" has begun to insist that all my ideas are hers. She has literally gone into staff meeting minutes and altered the information. She has changed the authorship of reports to list her name, instead of mine, between my last draft and when these reports are copied and distributed to higher ups! The only good thing is that my boss is aware of this, and so is our administrative assistant.

It seems that her "antics" are nothing new to this office. She has been a regular in HR, usually beating people to the punch with accusations of her own. I'm ready to scream that such behaviors have been allowed. She seems to create conversations in her mind, which come out in staff meetings like this, "Remember when you came into my office, and I told you...", or "You recommended that we do this, and I suggested that we do that, instead, and you agreed." She has refused to acknowledge me as #2 in the office and has been directed publicly in staff meetings that I am in charge in my boss's absences, which have been frequent due to illness.

Here's where it is now: My boss has drafted a letter to HR, which states clearly a plethora of situations that we have tried to deal with internally. She has recommended termination. I say, "Thank God!" With that said, we don't generally fire people around here. The most we can hope for is a reassignment. Not only that, my teammate's deceased husband was a company officer. She knows all the Board members, and goes to luncheons and social events that are way over my head. I think I may be spitting in the wind here.

I have told my boss that I am completely on board with a mediation of some sort. I'm not afraid of a civil confrontation, in public, with witnesses. I even say let's film the whole thing. But, she told me that she has tried that in the past with the other assistant directors, and it "ended badly." Can you imagine that I am not the first she has had an issue with?

I have been advised not to be alone with this woman, and not to have private conversations with her, due to her history of creating stories as a result of such meetings. Can you believe this? Even I sometimes feel like I'm making all this up because it is so unbelievable, and so *not* professional. I'm completely frustrated and am trying desperately to keep my eye on the ball. I am slated to become director when the director retires, which is imminent. It is getting difficult not to get dirty in the mud with this person. How do I keep my cool? Is it worth it? I have never dealt with anything like this in my professional life.

Help! Or just send directions to the nearest asylum.

Sign me,

Hanging On by My Fingernails

Dear Hanging On:

At first glance, it seems you are doing every right. You are working with your director and HR. You are volunteering for mediation. You are, no doubt, complying with instructions never to be alone with this nut case. That's all good.

Now, your goal is to get to the finish line. Once you are in charge of the department, you can engineer a showdown with HR and this miscreant, and unload her on some poor newbie (which is what they always do with lifers like this with an odious internal reputation).

I had to call out the big guns to answer your query. Here's some advice from my pal, Kathy Strickland, who runs the Strickland Group, a top executive coaching and communications consulting firm in NYC. "You can't make deals with psychotic people," she says, because they cannot or will not follow through. Nevertheless, you have to *appear* willing to make such deals. You can't be seen as the impediment to rational resolutions. View this like a court case with political overtones. "Document everything, every incident. List witnesses. And make your own allies with HR and if you can, with the Board."

Kathy also asks, "Are there any performance issues, where this woman is demonstrably failing to do her job?" If so, that can be leverage with HR. HR hates touchy feely disputes, but they can really embrace a documented failure to perform, or a cut-and-dried case of insubordination.

I also called my friend, Bob Chope, president of the National Employment Counseling Association based in Washington, D.C., and a renowned work psychologist with a practice in San Francisco. He said, "When it comes to compulsive liars, in the end there is nothing that they say that anybody can trust." Liars lie because it is empowering to them, and gives them control over situations and others. "What often happens," Bob continues, "is that they begin to believe the lies. Ultimately, they take the story too far, and it begins to implode on them, and they can be self destructive."

He also says that these are people who believe they cannot be caught. They believe they are smarter and better than others, which includes you. "These people have defenses in place that they will utilize when they think they might get caught, and they can be pretty good at it." Bob endorsed the recommendation that you never be alone with this person, and that you avoid any and all situations where it could boil down to your word against hers.

You are truly at risk, my friend. You said the director "drafted" a letter to HR. Make sure she sends that letter! Document, document, document. And beware some executive team deciding to clean house by throwing you and her out together and starting over.

Yours is the toughest case I've addressed in months. Good luck with it, and my best wishes for your continued success,

Donald Asher

Send your career emergency to [don@donaldasher.com](mailto:don@donaldasher.com), and watch this space for Asher's response.

BIO: Donald Asher is a nationally known writer and speaker on careers and higher education. He is the author of eleven books, including *Cracking the Hidden Job Market*; *How to Get Any Job: Life Launch and Re-Launch for Everyone Under 30*; *Graduate Admissions Essays*, the best-selling guide to the graduate admissions process; *Asher's Bible of Executive Resumes*; *Cool Colleges for the Hyper-Intelligent, Self-Directed, Late Blooming, and Just Plain Different*; and *Who Gets Promoted, Who Doesn't, and Why* (named Business Book of the Year 2008 by national career columnist Joyce Lain Kennedy). Asher speaks over 100 days a year from coast to coast, to college and corporate audiences. He is eager to hear your career emergency.