

How to stop being a people-pleaser

Being a people-pleaser and being an effective team player are two very different things.

BY ANNETTE CLANCY

Does your office have a people-pleaser? The person who just can't say no? Every office has one and regardless of how often they say yes, they will rarely be appreciated for their efforts. People-pleasers yearn for attention, external validation and the approval of the group. Their self-esteem is tied up with this effort to be seen as worthy of inclusion and living up to other's expectations. This type of behaviour can get out of hand and before it does, it is important to ask some basic questions about how it started in the first place.

How do we become people-pleasers?

More often than not, it's a characteristic that goes back a long time. We learn over time that being helpful, pleasing, attentive and reliable brings rewards. Our sense of accomplishment and achievement becomes tied to the external validation we receive from others. Being a people-pleaser often makes us the 'go to' person. It also means that our colleagues take us for granted and we are viewed as the office doormat. People-pleasers see themselves as only existing in the service of other people.

Children learn that they are a good girl or boy at a very early stage in life. Being 'good' and 'bad' is determined by the emotional effect they have on the adults in their lives. It is an early lesson that small children learn very quickly. They know that they can gain their parents' attention by being compliant or defiant. Compliance brings better rewards.

To stop being a people-pleaser we have to address the anxiety that pleasing assuages. For many people-pleasers, the idea of stopping being a pleaser raises enormous anxiety. At its core, that anxiety relates to our very sense of self: will I have any function or worth if I am not externally validated? So what can you do to stop pleasing and start progressing?

Address the anxiety: put yourself first. Ask 'why am I doing this?' There's nothing wrong with being helpful, but it's not always appropriate.

Practice saying no: imagine a number of scenarios where you would normally jump in to say 'yes' and then practice saying 'no'. Observe how this makes you feel and rather than squashing that feeling down. Stick with it and try to understand what it's telling you.

Recognise that your self-worth isn't tied to other people: it's perfectly normal to be ambivalent about others and it's equally normal for them to feel ambivalent about you. It's not possible to be positive or helpful all the time.

You will disappoint: you will disappoint others, and they will disappoint you. If we are not disappointing and disappointed, then we are not having real, mature relationships.

The workplace cannot function without real rather than prescribed emotion: in the fantasy workplace, everybody is happy. People are kind and helpful, and our colleagues rarely have an 'off' day. No workplace is like that (just as no family is like that). Being a people-pleaser robs individuals of their self-esteem and reinforces the idea that being 'nice' means being helpful. Sometimes it's better to say 'no' and stop being the office doormat. Try it sometime, you just might like the new feeling!



DR ANNETTE CLANCY

Dr Clancy is an organisational consultant and also researches organisational behaviour, in particular emotion in organisation.