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Featured Article

Defending Your Differences With Dignity

Anyone who's ever been made fun of knows how difficult it can be to keep their cool. Some of us, with our Enterprise desk models, blue hair, or retro Pac Man tattoos, have been made fun of quite a bit. But unlike in high school, a fist fight with a jock at the office will garner a lot more than after school detention. So nip any friction in the bud before it affects your career.

First, it might seem obvious, but try talking to any coworker you have trouble with. Some alternative styled people tend to stay quiet in an attempt not to rock the boat. But people like us do rock the boat just by virtue of being different. And if a coworker is picking on you, he's already noticed you, so you might as well try talking to him.

The key is to approach your coworkers in an amicable manner. Don't get back at them with wittily constructed insults of your own, even if you spent all night creating vulgar rhymes involving their favorite sports teams. Just don't do it. Instead, speak to them as a human being and a professional. Politely let them know that what they have been doing hurts your feelings and makes it difficult for you to focus on your job. Ask them to kindly respect your differences. If they still refuse to act like an adult, inform them you will redirect your complaints to their supervisor. Then do it.

Equal tact is called for when speaking to higher-ups, be it HR, a mutual supervisor, or a new manager. Recap your previous efforts and make it clear that you are not complaining out of a desire for revenge, but from a wish to resolve the issue. Be sure to explain how your expression of individuality holds no inherent disruptive factor. Unless, of course, what set off your coworker was a talking Batman statuette - at that point, you may want to rethink who really initiated the situation. But if you truly aren't at fault, most managers should be reasonable in handling the situation. That is, presumably, how they became managers in the first place.

If you can't muster the courage for a confrontation, another option is to cover up your strangeness at the office. Some places have a dress code that requires their employees to keep hair dye to the natural spectrum, remove any piercings, and cover any tattoos. Although some company policies can be a little extreme, they do offer a valid strategy for reducing cultural friction. Laying low by removing any geeky paraphernalia from your cubicle and dressing like a future CEO might help things die down. You can always surround yourself with your favorite schweg and change into your I Heart Wookies t-shirt when you get home.



Melissa Lytton is a freelance writer, artist, and model who specializes in alternative-styled content. She can be found online at happygothproductions.com.