

'IS YOUR PERSONALITY STALLING YOUR CAREER?' – KATE JAMES

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In an ideal world you would have the opportunity to observe the culture and the day to day workings of an organisation before you committed to taking on a new role. You'd make sure it was a place that would bring out the best in our personality – somewhere you'd feel supported, valued and respected for who you are. Somewhere that people would understand you and where they wouldn't take it personally when you were having an off day.

Generally speaking you know very little about the team members, the managers you'll work with or the company culture before accepting a new position. There's really only one thing you have control of in your workplace - and that is you.

Without question, your personality has the ability to make or break your career. No matter how great your technical skills are, if you're working with people you need to know how to get on with them. More importantly, when you want to get ahead in your organisation, you need to ensure your personality isn't holding you back.

Regardless of where you are in your career, your attitude at work will be noticed by the people around you. As much as you'd like to think people will just accept you the way you are, there's every chance that a lack of confidence or motivation or the fact that you choose not to interact socially, will go against you when it comes to being considered for promotion, pay rise or even just being given more rewarding tasks.

It's not always easy to stay upbeat and positive at work. There are many factors that play a part in how you approach each day. Invariably you'll behave differently in the different roles you have throughout your career. Even the city you're living in can make a difference to your approach.

Emma moved home to Sydney from London to take up a role in her old company. After being back for eight months, she felt as though her personality had regressed three years. All the confidence and business savvy she'd developed during her time overseas seemed to have been left behind. Even in a new department with a fresh set of colleagues, she had the sense that she was completely stunted by a version of herself that she thought she'd long outgrown.

Emma felt her confidence was continuing to slip every day. She'd been overlooked for promotion and she knew it was justified – her heart just wasn't in her role and her enthusiasm for work was at an all time low. Just turning up for work every day was taking enormous amounts of her energy. She barely had the inclination to chat to her colleagues, let alone speak up at meetings or perform her role in a proactive manner. Emma knew she was being perceived as unfriendly and uncommitted.

Emma's situation is not uncommon. When you leave your home town and make a fresh start in a new city or country, it's easy to leave behind the version of yourself that you've long wanted to outgrow. At home, people have a tendency to pigeon hole you. Your parents remind you of who you once were. Old friends are sometimes more comfortable to view you the way they always have and even you are reminded of your old self when you head back to familiar surroundings.

From time to time, we need to reflect on our personality traits and make a decision about whether it's time to change one or more aspects. It's more common for this to occur when we're faced with a crisis or a challenge of some kind and for many of us, these challenges begin in the workplace. Whilst your immediate reaction might be to leave your role (or the country), look at the situation as an opportunity to grow.

Generally speaking, successful people have a handful of characteristics that make them stand out from the crowd. They are confident and friendly and they go beyond the call of duty. They are willing to help others, they have a 'can do' attitude and they avoid office gossip. They are solution rather than problem focused and they are able to move on from conflict without bearing an obvious grudge.

If you are someone who finds it a challenge meeting new people, be aware that your shyness at work may be interpreted as unfriendly or unapproachable behaviour. If you're someone who struggles to arrive at work on time, stop kidding yourself that it won't be noticed. If you're not meeting deadlines or being proactive; if you're unmotivated or lacking in confidence, it's time for a personality overhaul.

Most of us are self aware enough to know where we let ourselves down. If you know which aspect of your personality holds you back the most, you'll like yourself better once you set to work on developing new habits.

Confidence can be created by approaching a situation differently. With some career coaching, Emma made a commitment to take control at work rather than giving in to her desire to jump on the next plane back to London. She knew there would be another opportunity for promotion later in the year so she set herself a goal to build her confidence and go after that promotion in a proactive way. She stepped away from feeling powerless and made a conscious choice to take control of the situation.

The first steps involved putting herself outside her comfort zone. She made a commitment to arrive at work half an hour early to prepare herself for the day. She made sure she was focused on completing tasks ahead of deadline and she cut down on her personal phone calls. Emma spent time preparing for meetings and made a point of speaking up whenever she could. She started to interact differently with a difficult colleague. Instead of complaining to a workmate about the colleague's poor performance she was proactive in asking them for what she required. She made sure her request was professional, succinct and non-threatening.

Emma found it helpful to select a business woman she admired as a role model and she spent some time reflecting on the qualities that made that person successful. When choosing a role model, you don't need to admire every aspect of their personality, just draw on the qualities they have that you need to work on most in yourself. Imagine how they would respond to a challenging workplace scenario and model this behaviour until it becomes comfortable for you.

In Emma's case, her commitment to reclaim her confidence and motivation paid off. Within twelve months she had achieved a promotion and a salary increase that took her to six figures. But most importantly, she was proud of the person she was being.

Tips

1. Greet your colleagues with a confident smile and 'good morning' as you arrive at the office. Be someone who is known to bring a breath of fresh air into the workplace.
2. Go above and beyond the call of duty. Be proactive – anticipate what needs doing ahead of time.
3. Learn how to think creatively so that you see a problem from all aspects and put out fires before they occur.
4. Help out a colleague where you can.
5. Avoid office gossip at all times.
6. Look for the positives in others and be willing to praise people openly where it's deserved. Never take credit for successes that aren't your own but be willing to give credit where it's due.

7. Be direct. Ask for what you want from others but in the process, try not to make people wrong. When you play the blame game, people are defensive rather than co-operative.
8. Learn how to put the 'confident business woman you' in the driver's seat. We all have the ability to draw on that person...sometimes you just need to make the decision to do so.
9. Communicate concisely. There's nothing worse than someone waffling on. Prepare your points ahead of time and learn to communicate in a succinct but friendly way. This goes for meetings, emails, all business correspondence and telephone calls.
10. Get the balance right. Don't take the nice thing too far...no one likes a person who is sickly sweet!