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In the Trenches by Francie Dalton

When executive assistants trade in resistance, drama

Under the guise of loyalty to the president, she functions as an impenetrable, inflexible gatekeeper. She only grants access to the CEO when it suits her personal agenda, won't work you into the CEO's calendar when you really need it and actively withholds contact information when the CEO is traveling.

Instead of sharing tips to help you be more successful with the CEO, this coworker provides as little information as possible, ignores or claims not to have received your e-mails and "forgets" to give your messages to the CEO.

Overtly snubbing those not in favor, she is verbally abrupt. She thrives on worsening inflammatory situations, creating opportunities to later claim martyrdom or victimization.

Every refusal to help is prefaced with the phrase: "Sorry, but the CEO has me doing something urgent."

When briefing the CEO, she misrepresents what you say and inflates the details of slightly strained interactions. Using artful innuendo, she reveals your every misstep to the CEO and manages to convey negative information about any others who have earned her disfavor.

Sound familiar? If so, you can legitimately claim to be suffering from a truly infuriating but all too common malady. And while you might get lots of sympathy from your equally frustrated colleagues, don't expect any from the CEO.

After all, just imagine having a highly organized executive assistant — a master scheduler who can choreograph complex projects and processes, who ensures all facets of your travel are flawless, who is adroit at anticipating your every mood and

preference, and who somehow manages to make even your tiniest inconvenience disappear.

Imagine a right-hand man or woman who is available to work evenings and weekends, willing to bring work to your home, always deferential yet adept at engaging in sophisticated, good-natured banter. Think how wonderful it would be to have someone aggressively protecting you and attentive to your every move. — someone you and your family can trust.

That's probably a pretty accurate description of the assistance your CEO is receiving from this grouchy bane of your existence.

Although you aren't likely to be successful in unseating the gatekeeper, you aren't helpless. You have options. But spending time sputtering your outrage to colleagues isn't one.

Depending upon your current situation, here are seven options for coping more effectively with the human obstacle.

■ You're new, but you've been there long enough to know the score: In this case, stay clean; don't do anything to get on her bad side.

■ You've screwed up, and you're in the dog house: Grovel. It'll be worth it in the long run. Demonstrate contrition by eliciting her feedback on how you can do things better.

■ Your relationship is beginning to erode, but you're not sure what offense you're guilty of. Engage, don't avoid. Schedule some time to talk things through. Don't make it threatening; just have an honest discussion about what you're sensing. Be curious and interested.

■ You're clearly and irrevocably on the

hit list: Interact by e-mail only in messages that are indisputably professional. This reduces the chance for inflammatory encounters and provides documentation of every communicate.

■ You're so aggravated that you've been retaliating: By sinking to this level, you'll make yourself more vulnerable. One of the luxuries you give up as a professional is the luxury of behaving the way you feel. Get a grip and behave.

■ You're a seasoned executive who isn't about to put up with this crap, but you don't yet want to complain to the CEO: Suggest a broadly focused, all-employee survey to reveal satisfaction levels on a variety of topics and diagnose potential vulnerabilities in the organization. Well-crafted assessment mechanisms include a narrative section where, if hosted by a third party, your comments are assured anonymity.

■ You and your colleagues have reached the breaking point: Confront her as a group on a day when the CEO is out. Make it clear that no one has yet gone to the CEO, but your complaints have been documented and you're prepared to go to the CEO if certain changes aren't made immediately and sustained.

In situations like this, it's not about what's right or wrong — it's about what will be effective in the real world. If you can't subordinate your anger to the achievement of an effective solution, then you've become part of the problem and have lost your right to complain.

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