

(U) "Ask Zelda!": Guilty Until Proven Innocent?

FROM: "Zelda," Dispenser of Advice on Workplace Issues
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(U) The below article is unclassified in its entirety.

Note: The following question has been edited for brevity.

Dear Zelda,

How do I exonerate myself from an "anonymous mailbag" incident?

A few months ago, a co-worker was really steamed about how things were going in our branch/division and wrote a livid message to our office's "anonymous mailbag," but showed a few of us the draft beforehand. I suggested that the wording was overly strong, as it referred to our managers as "abysmal" and "idiotic." The co-worker sent it anyway.

Co-worker receives praise and recognition from the office, despite the mail or because co-worker didn't come up on the list of suspects who wrote the message. In the meantime, the chill I'm feeling is pretty severe! I'm known to be a direct person, so possibly it was assumed that if anyone would write a message like that, I would; but I didn't, and I advised against it.

Because I agreed to look at the draft in confidence, I don't want to dime out my co-worker. What recourse do I have to officially establish that I have not used this mailbag? If I have something to say to anyone, I'll do it under my own name, and it won't involve using the words "abysmal" or "idiotic."

Help!!!!

And BTW, to me the situation I'm in is a good argument against "anonymous mailbags." Let people put their own names to criticisms they want to make of others. Otherwise, you end up with people like me who are wondering if we're getting unjustly blamed.

– Innocent Bystander

Dear Bystander,

You make a good case against anonymous mailbags, but a lot of people won't give feedback at all if they know it will be attributed to them. I believe scathing comments such as your co-worker's are the exception and not the rule in such mailbags.

Nevertheless, there is something you can do about the situation. Speak to the person(s) who is freezing you out. In private say, "I've notice you . . . [describe the treatment you're receiving]. Have I done something to offend you?"

If they mention "your" note, you have the opening to set the record straight. You can state what you did above -- that you have never used the mailbag and that if you had something to say to someone, you

would tell them directly 'cause that's how you roll.

If they don't bring up the note, at least you've made an attempt to clear the air. Maybe there is another reason for the cold shoulder. When they insist nothing is wrong, you could say something like, "I hope if you did have a problem with me, that you would talk to me directly about it. I would do the same for you." That plants the seeds of innocence in their mind (i.e., you would talk to them directly and not use an anonymous mailbag) if the cause is the note, and encourages them to broach the subject if it's something else.

Other "Anonymous Mailbag" Thoughts

While it is tempting to be completely uncensored when using anonymous feedback mechanisms, please understand that it can be counterproductive. A rude, accusatory, or overly severe comment can turn the recipient off to your suggestion for improvement. Try to make your comment constructive and free from emotional coloring. You are more likely to have it considered and initiate change that way.

Likewise, if you receive hostile feedback through an anonymous mailbag, it's easy to discount and ignore it, especially if it pushes your "hot" buttons. Instead, try to look past the way it is worded to see if there's a kernel of truth that requires action. Often important feedback is not couched in the most pleasant terms. While many people will accept gentle criticism from a friend, it takes a truly enlightened person to acknowledge that an adversary's nasty comment might have some merit and to do something about it.

(U) Standard disclaimer: Zelda's views are her own and do not represent the official views of the Associate Directorate for Corporate Leadership, Human Resources, SID, or any other NSA organization.

(U) Looking for some of the older "Ask Zelda" columns? They are filed away in the archives under the "Ask Zelda! 2010" and "Ask Zelda 2011" series. Also, if you'd like to submit a question of your own to Zelda, just use the "comments/suggestions about this article" button below to send it in.