

THE SUPERSTAR SLOB

Dealing with “Pigpen phenomenon”: A talented workhorse employee who’s always overwhelmed and behind

Janet* was an intellectual powerhouse with high work standards and an endless depth of knowledge. Yet everyone agreed that she was clearly overwhelmed. Maybe she didn’t have enough staff, or was the role itself just too demanding? Was she fully leveraging the team through effective delegation? Or was she simply a pleaser, just incapable of saying no?

Whatever the causes, the results were missed deadlines; an office that resembled a fire hazard with towering stacks of paperwork; a work/life balance completely out of whack; and an inability to prioritize. Her boss was getting tired of the huge sighs that greeted every new assignment and the complaints from other departments waiting for her contributions to shared projects so they could move ahead with theirs.

There were other issues as well. Janet’s communication style was sloppy – she thought out loud when she needed to be concise; she dumped every conceivable piece of data into a presentation rather than editing for the intended audience; and she rambled during Q&As. Yet she continued to work long hours, and because of her experience and subject-matter expertise, remained the go-to person for difficult questions and critical information.

In reviewing evaluations from her other roles and organizations, Nancy observed that Janet had always had these problems. Her previous bosses noted the excessive hours that led her team to think they couldn’t leave on time or take vacations. The train wreck of an office, her always feeling behind and harried—it wasn’t this job in particular; it was Janet herself.

Nancy has dubbed this the “Pigpen phenomenon,” for the Peanuts character followed by a cloud of dirt and dust wherever he goes. As Wikipedia explains...

“When he takes a deep breath (to sing, for example), the dust rises briefly around him. He sometimes refers to the cloud that surrounds him with pride as the dust of ancient civilizations. He cannot seem to rid himself of the dust for more than the briefest of periods — indeed, in spite of his best efforts, it appears that he cannot stay clean...Nevertheless, on rare occasions he has very briefly appeared clean, and hence unrecognizable.”

Janet enjoyed creating and sitting in the center of the swirl. She created the excessive noise and distractions and multiple to-dos because it made her feel necessary and essential to her boss and the organization. Because she often felt overwhelmed she also felt entitled to complain, thereby winning on all fronts: she did too much so she was needed and critical to the company, while feeling aggrieved and put upon, leading her to continually fight for more resources. Which of course would have only made matters worse, not better, as she took on more people and issues to manage. She didn't more resources – she needed to better manage herself.

In the end, this strategy always leads to a dead end or a plateau. She wouldn't be fired since she was such a workhorse, but neither would she be promoted because she could neither manage nor lead.

Yet her company valued Janet too much not to invest in her development. The management team wanted to retain her, potentially promote her, but they knew she needed additional help in figuring out new strategies and techniques of managing herself, her work load, and the team.

Nancy conducted a customized 360 that revealed the impact Janet's sloppiness was having on her team. They felt demoralized and hesitant to approach her, given how overwhelmed she seemed. Janet prided herself on being a developmental leader, and her team's critical

feedback hurt. But it was the hard truth she needed so that she could begin the important work of changing her perspective and more importantly, her actions.

Janet and Nancy conducted a follow up focus group with the team, soliciting tactical suggestions for improvement, and also requested that the group call her out if she slipped up. Six months later, she is more productive, less stressed out and considered both a role model and a success story. The team is more productive and newly confident in her leadership. And her boss? He promoted her.

Moral of the story: If you want to be promoted, learn to leave yourself behind. Embrace delegating, prioritizing and saying no. If being at eye of the hurricane is how you get recharged, you will always attract a lot of work and attention. But you're not going anywhere.

**Name changed.*