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What to Do About a Suitemate's Toxic Employee?

I recently moved into a suite. There is a paralegal working for another attorney who is simply one of the most toxic people I've ever encountered. She radiates unhappiness, yells at her boss in front of my assistant and other persons, and clearly has significant emotional problems that she seems unwilling to address. The attorney's brand-new associate has told me that the paralegal is making her miserable. She is rude to my assistant. The former associate said that he would have fired her if he could. The employing attorney (who is a nice guy but does not seem to have a lot of "emotional intelligence") seems oblivious to the problems this woman is creating for everyone.

I'm not sure what I should do at this point. If she was my employee, she'd be gone — but she's not. Would you go to the employing attorney and raise the issue of how this employee makes him look?

I would bring up the problems with the employing attorney, but start with expressing them from your experience. Start with what you have witnessed, how this made you look, how this made the office look, and then if he doesn't connect the dots, how it makes him look. His response is going to tell you whether you want to stay in this suite. Don't be surprised if he doesn't want to deal with it and expresses annoyance with you at asking him to think about it.

I was in a shared office situation in a converted house that I ended up leaving partially because of the owner's refusal to even acknowledge problems being created by someone he'd brought in. The problem person was another tenant, who came in when I'd been there several years. When this attorney started doing things that was making the office look really unprofessional to visitors, I brought it up to the owner (who also officed there) and he made excuses for her. Then the attorney did something strange and rude to the receptionist (who was working through lunch on her boss's orders, and who went into the kitchen to finish her partially eaten lunch, only to discover that this attorney had finished it for her) (I am serious; it was that stupid), and the owner treated the receptionist as a troublemaker for being upset about this, particularly because he didn't give her time to get other food, or, heaven forbid, offer to order some in for her. I got the same attitude when a few staff mishaps happened directly affecting me. So I was already mentally preparing to leave by the time the last straw came: arriving for work and finding that my key no longer worked. It turned out that the owner had replaced the lock late the afternoon before because the problem attorney had shoved the wrong key into the lock and it had jammed beyond salvage. She had a new key. Nobody else did. And of course, the owner was ticked off immensely that



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he had to come to the office by 9 to let everyone in.

Bottom line is -- people who invite in unacceptable behavior might not react the way you do to it. How long is your lease for?

Good luck,

Kathy Biehl

From a legal perspective, she may present a hostile work environment for your assistant; if so you need to react proactively by addressing the paralegal directly and advising her that any venom directed to you or your employee will not be tolerated. From a practical point of view, I would invite her employer to lunch and ask him about her. How he came to hire her, what he likes about her, etc. Somewhere in the conversation, work in what your observations have been and that the situation seems ripe for him to lose other employees or possibly face a lawsuit over the hostile work environment.

Duke Drouillard

PS -- What are the lines of authority in this suite? Is someone in charge? I would tell that person if the employing attorney isn't receptive to dealing with this.

Good luck,

Kathy Biehl

Two options, as I see it:

1. Convince employer to address and curb behavior.
2. Leave.

While you are there, no rule that you have to tolerate or escalate poor behavior. You may choose to address behavior that impacts you or make clear what your rules are, but do not have enforcement power. Therefore it may add to toxicity rather than alleviate it. Tact, discretion, discipline, backbone and other qualities may change behavior. It also may not.

Darrell G. Stewart

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