



# Relationships at Work

How are you getting along with your coworkers?

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# INTRODUCTION



## The Coworkers We Share

Despite their different qualities and quirks,  
we need to love them all.

I don't know you, but I'll bet we've had some of the same coworkers. Let me describe some of them for you.

Ladder-Climbing Lucinda leaves eyes rolling in her wake as she schmoozes the boss, yet she always seems to get that coveted promotion.

Angry Angie is perpetually mad at somebody, something, or everything. She thrives on conflict.

Gossipy Geraldine tells you everything you never wanted to know about everybody. You've even heard her telling someone a story about you that *you* didn't even know!

Backstabbing Brenda quickly becomes your best friend, but it isn't long before she betrays you.

Lazy Lucy works fewer hours than you and doesn't work nearly as hard, but somehow she gets paid a lot more than you do.

Atheist Annie doesn't believe in God, and she doesn't hesitate to tell you about it every chance she gets. In her opinion, anyone with a brain can see that religion is a crutch for weak people.

Sound familiar? If you have ever had a job, you know these people, and I'm sure you could add to the list. Just thinking about some of them makes your stomach clench. However, Jesus tells us the second greatest commandment is to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). And I think we would all agree that the definition of "neighbor" includes our coworkers.



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In the following collection of articles, you'll learn about how to apply Jesus' command to your coworkers. It is my prayer that these resources will inspire and equip you to create God-honoring relationships with your coworkers, regardless of their varied personalities and quirks. And think about it—that's just how God loves you and me.

Blessings,

*Dana Wilkerson*  
*Contributing Editor, Women's and Family Issues*  
*Christianity Today International*



# LEADER'S GUIDE



## How to use “Relationships at Work” for a group study.

“Relationships at Work” can be used for individual or group study, but if you intend to lead a group study on this, some simple suggestions follow:

- 1 Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.
- 2 Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.
- 3 Alternatively, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.
- 4 Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.
- 5 When working through the “Thought Provokers” be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It’s important for women to know that others share their experience. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.
- 6 End the session in prayer.



# FEATURES



## My Coworker, My Friend?

**Four ways to spot a confidante  
among the cubicles.**

*by Julie-Allyson Ieron*

With trepidation, I boarded the commuter train that would take me to my first real job—as a public relations writer/spokesperson for a Fortune 500 company. Surprisingly, I wasn't overly concerned about hitting it off with my boss or thriving in a new work environment. What bothered me most was the profound sense of loneliness that seemed to loom overhead. My nearest confidantes were hundreds of miles away, and I knew none of my new colleagues. How would I survive an alien terrain without friends?

An hour later, my supervisor paraded me around the building to meet my coworkers. It was then I met Debbie, a sharp young woman a few years older than I was. She looked up from her workstation and smiled as our boss introduced us.

Debbie and I became fast friends. We lunched together; in fact, Debbie's the one who introduced me to the trendy pre-Evian drink of club soda with a twist of lime. During our lunches, Debbie explained the unspoken corporate public-relations office rules: Wear skirts and blazers if you want to get ahead; steer clear of the boss when a media circus is brewing; treat administrative assistants, reporters, and cameramen with respect; and always recheck your facts. Most of all, Debbie and I made each other laugh when the stress meter in our office hit critical. Our friendship made two demanding jobs more livable.

Over the years I've chosen some good workplace friends such as Debbie—and some not-so-good ones (whose names I'd rather forget). Likely you have, too. As women who may spend half (or more) of our waking hours at an office or volunteering in some capacity, it's natural for us to be on the lookout for fellow workers with whom to share the journey. But who's that woman in the cubicle, classroom, or seat next to us? How can we tell whether she's someone we can trust to become a true friend?



As I do with most decisions in life, I've sought what the Bible says about finding and being a friend. After identifying several relevant verses, I've learned to ask myself four key questions when choosing career friends.

**One: Is she willing to speak and accept the truth?** Maybe I'm more trusting than most, but I didn't realize the importance of asking this question until I'd endured a painful experience. For many months I'd trusted a fellow worker implicitly—only to overhear her one afternoon bragging that she'd lied to a superior just to get him off her back. While she hadn't yet lied to me, I soon learned she'd lied *about* me. In discovering her propensity to alter the truth in her favor, I realized I'd been misguided in trusting her. Our friendship crumbled on its shifty foundations.

But it isn't just an outright lie that disqualifies a potential friend. It's her complete handling of the truth. Will she tell me when she thinks I'm on the wrong path, or will she tell me only what she thinks I want to hear? How will she accept me if I tell her something she doesn't want to hear? Not everyone wants to hear the truth. Yet, the Bible calls us to be truthful in our relationships while tempering our honesty with love (Ephesians 4:15) and grace (John 1:14). It's a friend's responsibility to wrap the truth in a kind and loving package.

I lost a client not long ago because I chose to be honest with him about inherent problems I observed at the outset of a project. I soon discovered he didn't want to be bothered by facing the truth. This left me feeling devalued—certainly not a good foundation for a friendship.

Lin, a colleague and client for more than a decade, is just the opposite. Lin counts on me to do a monthly project for her that requires a several-hour commitment and an ability to turn it around in 24 hours or less. Last year, when I was writing my fourth book and overseeing a construction project at home, I went through a six-month period when I couldn't clear my schedule when Lin needed me to. I told her (and meant it) that she could replace me, that I couldn't promise to do what I knew I couldn't deliver. Even though Lin had to scramble to find a backup for me, she continued to be nothing but understanding and supportive. When I finished my book and moved into my new home office, she asked me to resume my work with her. Not only a loyal client, Lin proved herself a worthy friend.

**Two: Is she able to keep a private matter private?** Side by side with truth-telling is the fact that friendship grows through the intimate sharing of joys and sorrows that aren't for the whole world to know. In the Old Testament, wise King Solomon said, "A gossip separates close friends" (Proverbs 16:28). Or, to put it in modern terms, you can't share confidences with someone who'll turn around and broadcast (or worse, embellish) what you've shared over the office airwaves.



Heeding this advice, I've learned to use a degree of restraint when I share my struggles with a new workplace friend. I'll try her out on something small and see whether it makes its way back to me via the office grapevine. This lengthens the time it takes to cement a friendship, but it's a small price to pay not to be burned.

And when I say "burned," I mean *burned*. I once knew a woman who went through a messy divorce. One morning, she went into her office early only to find a colleague (purportedly a friend) shuffling through her private papers. It turned out the colleague was being paid by her ex-husband to spy for him.

Breaking a confidence is huge—even in less blatant circumstances. What a coworker tells me in private, I keep in private. And I expect the same courtesy from her.

**Three: Is she secure enough to act without jealousy?** This may be the trickiest qualification to fill. It's hard to find anyone who doesn't carry with her a personal agenda of one kind or another. Perhaps that agenda is to make herself look better by taking someone else down a rung or two. Perhaps her *modus operandi* is to find someone moving up in the organization and cozy up to her. Either way, someone whose agenda is self-serving isn't the most trustworthy friend. Conversely, someone who holds our best interests at heart is a friend to be valued above all others.

Two women worked as entry-level staffers in a department I managed several years ago. They were young, bright-eyed, and enthusiastic; I enjoyed the energy their friendship generated. I knew these women had ambitions that exceeded their current roles, but I didn't want to lose either one as a key employee. I had two choices: I could be selfish and keep them hidden in my department, or I could give them exposure to others in the company who might promote them.

I chose the latter. To start, I invited them into meetings where they would be exposed to those in the company who were doing jobs they envisioned for themselves. When the opportunity arose to send them to advanced training, I recommended the company pick up the bill. Within months, both were promoted to positions they'd dreamed of reaching. Good for me? In the short run, I missed their contributions. But in the long run, it felt good to realize I'd played a part in helping two deserving women advance in their careers.

**Four: Is she likely to challenge me toward excellence?** I had a friend once who complained all the time. We worked side-by-side, and frankly our jobs warranted every grievance she voiced. It didn't take long until I picked up on her habit—and even achieved new lows in grouching. I still can recall the day when we met in the ladies room and traded frustrations. Unknown to us, our boss lurked around the corner eavesdropping on our complaint session. When she'd heard enough, she burst out from her hiding place and berated us. Doubtless, we deserved it.



I'm not dense, though. That day, I started backing away from my friendship with this coworker because her negative influence on me wasn't something I wanted to prolong.

If it's true a friend can tear us down, it's also true the right friend can build us up. Friends sharpen, strengthen, and enhance our lives. I've always liked the Bible verses that say, "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!" (Ecclesiastes 4:9, 10).

Holly Miller has proved this principle to me for the last 17 years. We met during my senior year of college when I stepped into the writing class she taught. Holly still laughs when she tells the story of the cocky student (me) who wouldn't accept a B on an assignment the first week of class. I guess Holly saw I wanted to be challenged toward excellence because she never let up on me during the semester I was in her class—she *still* hasn't let up on me! We eventually went from maintaining a professor/student relationship to fostering a professional friendship.

When I've been discouraged, I've always been able to zap an e-mail to Holly and receive an encouraging word in return. Likewise, the other day I heard from another student who benefited from Holly's teaching. I forwarded his e-mail to Holly, and she replied to me that the encouragement reached her on a day when she needed a pick-me-up.

I'm a better writer because of Holly's contribution in my life. I'm a more successful business person because of Debbie's input. And I hope I'm a better friend to others because of the truthfulness and unselfishness of countless women who've worked in the cubicles next to mine.

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**Thought Provokers**

- *How do you spot new friends at work?*
- *In what ways did this article affect you? What will you change about the way you choose friends at work as a result of reading this article?*
- *How can you use the advice in this article to become a better friend to others at work?*



# FEATURES



## Rumor Has It ...

All the juicy details on avoiding office gossip.

by Rhonda Wilson

Not long ago, a coworker crept into my office and quietly closed my door. Judging by the look on her face, I knew she was about to give me the latest scoop on something big. She began to divulge some unsavory details about a person whom I'd always thought was happily married. But apparently this colleague had been involved in multiple covert affairs.

I was shocked by this revelation—and should have ended the conversation then and there. But unfortunately, I didn't. My eyes grew big as saucers as my coworker began naming names. But what was so titillating in the moment has left me full of regret. Now I'm faced with some very negative information about a person I once admired. And I don't even know if the accusations are true!

Gossip—that chatty talk about other people's intimate matters—is a favorite pastime around many office lunch tables and water coolers. If asked point-blank, most of us would say gossip is a bad habit, yet our culture treats it lightly. Everyday we can access websites, watch television shows, or read tabloids to get the latest scandal scoop on celebrities and politicians. Some websites even send you an e-mail alert on late-breaking gossip. In our voyeuristic world of reality TV, being privy to intimate details of a person's life is socially acceptable.

But while we may innocently “dish,” “get the goods,” or hear “the dirt” on someone, God doesn't take gossip lightly. He says our tongues are set on fire by hell (James 3:6). He commands us not to keep corrupt talk from our lips in Proverbs 4:24. And God doesn't want us listening to gossip, either. Hearing gossip is about as bad as spreading it, since you can't erase the negative words you've heard about a person. Proverbs 26:22 says, “The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man's inmost parts.”



### Gossip Just Plain Hurts

Simply put, gossip hurts people. When my dearest friend and coworker went through a divorce, many of our colleagues came to me for information. It was the “juiciest” story to rock my office in a long time. Married only six months, my friend’s husband moved to another country, came back for a day to file for divorce, and then left again. Discussing her hurt and raw emotions with others seemed unthinkable. Furthermore, I ran the risk of circulating rumors. Human resources specialist Cassie Dibiase, owner of Resources and Results Consulting in Houston, Texas, points out, “Think back to the playground, when someone spread untrue tales around the schoolyard. They were hurtful, unproductive, and damaged friendships. Playground rules still apply. The only difference is professional reputations are taken more seriously, and the stakes are higher.”

Cassie adds that workplace gossip is probably the single most destructive behavior in which anyone in the marketplace can engage. Consider these key points:

- Workplace gossips are viewed as untrustworthy and are less likely to receive promotions or key assignments.
- Important lines of communication between employees and supervisors often are disrupted because of a lack of trust created by gossip.
- What might appear to be simple gossip often can result in a full-blown investigation, causing irreparable damage to an individual’s reputation, and to the gossiper’s reputation as well.

It’s obvious that not only is God displeased when we gossip, but so is our employer. So how do you avoid the office rumor mill?

### Define Gossip

There’s a good rule of thumb to help you determine whether you’re gossiping: Ask yourself how you’d feel if the person you’re discussing suddenly happened upon your conversation. Would you be embarrassed? Chances are, as a Christian, you *know* when you’re gossiping. You get that unsettled feeling from the Holy Spirit that tells you what you’re discussing isn’t quite appropriate.

To discern what is and isn’t acceptable to discuss, use Philippians 4:8 as a guide: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” While the apostle Paul’s talking about our thought life here, Philippians 4:8 is a good way to measure our conversations, too.



#### **Restrain Loose Talk**

Surrounding yourself with like-minded Christian friends helps keep gossip in check. For example, Sarah and her friend Stacy are close confidantes. As Christians, they worried about crossing the line of gossip in their daily conversations. This became of particular concern when they both became involved in a ministry to moms and a not-so-congenial member of the group became a frequent topic of their discussions. It seemed ironic that they found themselves participating in unproductive talk about this person when all three of them were involved in ministry. So Sarah and Stacy came up with a few guidelines to follow in their conversations:

- They allowed no excuses for gossiping about a person's unlovable characteristics, because God loves us all, quirks and annoying habits included.
- They granted permission to call each other on it when one of them crossed the line into gossiping.

Sarah and Stacy also asked themselves four questions based on the Rotary International's Four Way Test: Is what we're saying the truth? Is it fair to all concerned? Will it build better relationships? Is the talk beneficial?

When their speech began to tread into gossip territory, one gently reminded the other they needed to steer their conversation toward a more edifying topic.

#### **Switch Conversational Tracks**

While maintaining ties with fellow believers helps keep our tongue in check, we don't always share office space with other Christians. How do you keep gossip under control when you're with people who aren't necessarily focused on guarding their talk? While my first impulse is to try to stay away from situations that put me in the midst of gossip, I'm reminded that Jesus broke bread with nonbelievers, including gossipers.

When gossip begins around you, try to cut it off with a gentle remark to sway the conversation. Or better still, turn to your gossiping coworker and ask her about what's happening in *her* life. It's been said a gossip is one who talks to you about others, a bore is one who talks to you about herself, and a brilliant conversationalist is one who talks to you about you. Getting her to talk about herself is an almost guaranteed way to change the conversation.

#### **Tame That Tongue**

No matter how hard we try to avoid gossip, we'll still catch ourselves slipping every now and then. As Sarah puts it, "Gossiping is something we always have to keep in check with the Lord." The best way to do that is through committing your heart,



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mind, and tongue to God daily. As Beth Moore writes in *When Godly People Do Ungodly Things*, “Prayer keeps the mouth open before God on the matter, rather than open before others ... We have no business gossiping about members of the Body of Christ [or nonbelievers for that matter]. If we would turn the time we spent discussing the other’s life into prayer time instead, no telling what would happen to the glory of God.”

Why not pray a simple prayer in faith and release control of your speech into God’s hands? Confess when you’ve failed, then ask Him for the ability to say only wholesome things that benefit your listeners, that build others up according to their needs (Ephesians 4:29). Ask God for the strength to take not only every thought but also every word captive to make them obedient to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5). Surrender your thoughts and words for Him to use for *His* glory, not yours.

My perspective on gossip’s devastating power changed drastically in junior high when I started an ugly rumor about a girl whom I found kissing the boy I liked. By day’s end, the gossip had reached every corner of my middle school, and my victim was in tears at the news that everyone knew she’d been “making out” with this boy. She was so upset that she hyperventilated, had to go the school nurse’s office, and then was sent home for the day. When my mom found what I had done, she asked me if this was how a Christian behaved. “No,” I answered feebly.

I’m an adult in the workplace now; I understand adult problems. So I continue to try my best—with the Holy Spirit’s help—to avoid ever again participating in something so damaging.

The truth is, gossip isn’t any different now than how it was when we were in junior high. Only now the stakes, as Cassie Dibiase points out, are so much higher. Careers, marriages, children, church unity, testimonies, and other important areas that could be irreparably damaged by loose talk are on the line.

As I try to focus on what’s good to discuss, I remember to put it to the test of Philippians 4:8. And what if there’s nothing good to say? Then in the words of our mothers’ age-old advice, “If you can’t find anything good to say, then say nothing at all!”

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### **Thought Provokers**

- *How has gossip affected a relationship you have had at work?*
- *How do you try to avoid listening to or spreading gossip?*
- *What is the most important thing you learned from reading this article?*



# FEATURES



## Working 9 to 5

**5 surprising ways you can survive—  
and thrive—in your job.**

*by Verla Gillmor*

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During my early years as a journalist, I was given the opportunity to work as a general assignment reporter for NBC's radio station in Chicago. The job catapulted me into broadcasting's big leagues, and I was determined to work hard, think smart, and wow everybody with my excellent reporting skills.

One of my first assignments was a "breaking" news story of a pleasure boat sinking in a storm on Lake Michigan. Several passengers drowned. The Coast Guard dramatically rescued the rest. I raced to the scene where a Coast Guard cutter was bringing survivors ashore, interviewed anyone who would talk to me, then hurried back to the station to get the story on the air as quickly as possible.

My editor, a crusty fellow with more than 20 years at NBC, had a reputation for making the lives of on-air staffers as miserable as possible—especially the women. Humiliation and intimidation were his weapons of choice.

As I scrambled to finish my report for the fast-approaching newscast, he seized on the fact I'd failed—in my rush to file the story—to get the Coast Guard spokesman's first name. It was a careless error on my part, but not one that merited what happened next.

The editor stood in the middle of the newsroom in front of about a dozen people and began to shout insults at me in the ugliest display of meanness I'd ever experienced. I stood facing him like a deer caught in the headlights and silently prayed, *Dear God, don't let me cry.* Finally, he turned and stalked out of the newsroom.



I was so stunned, I started to shake. As I walked into a side office to privately regain my composure, I thought, with deep resignation, *This is just part of the job. Guess I'll have to pray and "hang in there" until this passes.*

Now, with the hindsight of 35 years in the marketplace, I've learned no one has a "perfect" job. But I've also discovered—the hard way—that there *are* alternate ways to handle the inevitable workplace conflicts or stresses we all encounter. The surprising news is that the five problem-solving tips below don't depend on anyone's cooperation but your own!

#### **1) Identify the Real Problem: Is It You?**

Much as I hate to admit it, some job stress is self-inflicted. My first memory of this was a situation that began quite innocently.

I clipped out a business-related magazine article to give to my boss. I'd run across the article the night before while thumbing through a magazine for relaxation. He was delighted and urged me to continue to pass along anything I thought might be useful. His praise felt so good, I started scanning magazines I never would have read, searching for more articles. They were such a hit, he decided the practice should be formalized into a daily briefing book distributed to senior staff.

What started as a casual gesture became a major project on top of my regular duties. No one offered to help, and I didn't ask for any. I relished the affirmation and couldn't bear the thought of handing it off to someone else. That didn't stop me, however, from harboring anger and resentment over the added work.

It wasn't until much later that I realized the problem wasn't the workload. The problem was me—my need for affirmation, my penchant for people-pleasing, my reluctance to ask for help.

When you clarify exactly what the issue is behind your workplace stress, it can lessen your sense of victimization, even if the revelation isn't particularly welcome.

**SELF CHECK: What is the main source of my work-related stress? How am I contributing to the problem?**

#### **2) Take Charge of Your Attitude**

How many times have you sat in the employee lunchroom with coworkers when a person starts to complain about a change in the office hours, the vacation schedule, or the telephone rotation? Within five minutes, everyone sitting around the table feels obliged to chime in with their own litany of job gripes. Complaining is contagious. It's hard not to become a carrier.



Complaining gives the appearance of offering relief—a chance to vent. But rehashing a stressful situation in a setting that offers no opportunity for correcting the problem takes emotional energy and doesn't change the problem. In fact, it can make a problem seem worse than it is.

The Bible says, in essence, to save your breath. Jesus reminds us in Matthew 12:36 that someday we'll have to answer for every careless word we've ever spoken. So vow instead to be a carrier of the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). If you have a suggested solution, go to the person with the power to execute the solution, and make your case. Relish being part of the solution, not part of the problem.

**SELF CHECK: Who is the appropriate person with whom to discuss this? Is there another way I can look at this situation? What can I do to help eliminate this stress rather than rehash it?**

### **3) Sort Out What Can and Can't Change**

If you're a person who loves clear instructions and an even flow of work, then working in an advertising agency or a sales office full of hard-charging free spirits is definitely migraine material. Since it's doubtful that your environment's going to change, any change must take place in you.

I was totally clueless about this concept of "job fit" until, as a young adult, I temped for three months in an office where the median age of the employees was 55 and the office mantra was, "We've always done it this way."

My boss held a brainstorming session to discuss ways to "fast track" a particular project. I'm a big-picture idea person and joyfully showered him with suggestions. He didn't like any of them. In fact, he thought I was a little too innovative for my own good.

I eventually learned he really didn't want to improve things or use this project as an opportunity to implement permanent change. That might expose the reality that his time-honored procedures had been ineffectual all along. Rather, he chose a temporary maneuver to get us through the project, after which things could return to "normal."

I had two choices—neither of which I liked. I could stay—and stuff down all the gifts and talents God wrote on my DNA so I wouldn't be seen as a troublemaker. Or I could leave and find a more compatible job.



We always have choices. The question is whether we *like* the choices we're given. I didn't want to leave; I wasn't the problem. The reality, however, was that *they* weren't going to change.

**SELF CHECK: What's within my power to change about my situation? If nothing changes, can I stay and still be true to myself, as God created me? If I should leave, what needs to happen for me to be prepared?**

#### 4) Detach from the Problem

I once worked for a large corporation in a job that required me to prepare month-end reports with input from other people. Every month, despite clearly defined deadlines, the information came to me at the last minute. I always ended up staying late on Friday night to complete the report while everyone else was off enjoying their weekend. I was certain my colleagues' failure to meet the deadline was a form of thoughtlessness toward me and carelessness toward their job. It felt personal.

One day a coworker said to me in frustration, "You know, the reason this information is always late is because the cycle for capturing this data is totally out of sync with the deadline for the report. Is there any reason why the report can't be due the 5th of the month instead of the 1st? Then, meeting your deadline would be no problem."

It turned out my boss didn't care if it was the 5th or even the 10th of the month, as long as it came in on time every 30 days. I sheepishly abandoned my paranoia and feelings of rejection. It wasn't personal after all.

Is your reaction to a stressful situation disproportionate to the circumstances? Maybe it's a sign something else is going on. In this particular situation, I realized my job responsibilities had nearly doubled over the last 18 months. It wasn't just the monthly reports—it felt as though my whole job had run amok. I couldn't see the real problem until I was forced to step back and look at the situation as a detached observer.

**SELF CHECK: If I stepped outside myself and observed this situation, would I see it differently? What mental "prompts" can I give myself to stop taking problems too personally?**



#### 5) Live in the Present

Stress is more manageable if it doesn't also carry the weight of all past and future problems that bear any resemblance to it: "My boss *always* waits until the last minute to do these mailings." "My team leader *never* asks my opinion."

Such "kitchen sink" thinking—piling onto the present problem "everything but the kitchen sink"—sabotages solutions by sheer pound weight. Jesus reminded us in Matthew 6:34 to live in the present because "Each day has enough trouble of its own." The current moment may be tough. But soon it will pass and, chances are, a better moment will take its place.

**SELF CHECK: Has "piling on" problems ever solved anything? Whom can I ask to hold me accountable for changing this behavior pattern? Am I willing to deal with my present situation without attaching baggage to it?**

#### The Bottom Line

If you're waiting for your job to behave, expect a long wait. We live in a fallen world. Instead, over and over I remind myself, *How much of this will matter in 5, 10, or 100 years?* In the midst of the ups and downs of work, if our life is anchored to the One who doesn't move—Christ, the solid Rock—then we can survive ... and even thrive. He promised.

*Verla Gillmor, a TCW regular contributor and freelance writer, lives in the Chicago area. This article first appeared in the November/December 1999 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine.*

#### Thought Provokers

- *How do you usually interact with your coworkers when you're stressed?*
- *Which of these tips is most helpful to you? Why? What will you change because of it?*
- *What is the most stressful situation you are facing at work right now? With this situation in mind, go through the "self check" questions and see if the problem can't be eliminated.*



# FEATURES



## Who, Me? Jealous?

Combating the green-eyed monster at work.

by Liz Curtis Higgs

I was a member of a prestigious professional association for all of two weeks when I showed up at their national convention in Atlanta. My name badge—unlike most others—didn't sport a single special ribbon or honorary designation. I was—horrors!—unknown. Unimportant.

My heart cried out, *I'm nobody here, Lord!*

People squinted at my barren name tag, then kept walking, looking through me like so much clear glass. I sat through one presentation after another, sinking lower and lower in my seat. Then, alone in my hotel room, I reviewed the day's notes and ended up weeping, feeling frustrated, inadequate, and overwhelmed. How could I ever hope to reach their level of expertise?

I kept telling myself I wasn't so much jealous as I was discouraged. *It's not envy, Lord, I'm simply feeling left out.*

As the years passed, doors began to swing open. Soon, I found myself dealing with a new set of unfamiliar, unpleasant feelings: *Why she's moving along faster than I am, Lord? Why did they honor her instead of me?*

I wasn't jealous, of course. Merely, uh ... competitive.

The awful truth revealed itself one gray morning when I received an announcement from a colleague who'd been blessed with an opportunity I was convinced should have been mine. I tossed the letter across the room in an angry huff, whining, "It's not fair, Lord!"

He chose that moment to get my attention. *Was the cross of Calvary fair, Liz? Have I called you to succeed—or surrender?*



I was undone. Jealousy, envy, and strife were alive and well in my jade-green heart. After a time of weeping and confession, I knew what needed to happen next. I sent a heartfelt message to more than sixty peers in writing and speaking, women who love and serve the Lord and who—here's the ugly truth in a nutshell—push my jealousy buttons without even knowing it. Included with my note was a brief survey that encouraged my sisters to help me—help all of us—deal with the seldom discussed reality of professional jealousy.

Their candid answers began pouring in anonymously, as requested. I was especially touched by one role model who wrote, “I could be really spiritual, but I’ll be truthful instead.”

Just as I’d hoped, my anonymous contributors offered several specific suggestions for experiencing victory over Ol’ Green Eyes.

**Confess and pray.** The business world uses phrases like “friendly competition” and “may the best person win.” In Christian circles, we declare we’re “working for the Lord”—but sometimes the truth is less honorable. Although I’ve sung “To God Be the Glory” for fifteen years, I’m finally realizing it’s “easier sung than done.”

Once a week, someone calls me to say, “All my friends think I’m as funny as you. How do I get started in writing and speaking?” The outside Liz used to smile and say, “Isn’t that wonderful?” while the inside Liz gritted her teeth, thinking, *Oh, perfect. Another competitor.*

First, I have to admit my jealousy is a sin: “If you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth” (James 3:14). Then I ask for forgiveness and healing, just as one of my friends puts it: “I pray for a clean heart and confess honestly to God about the status of my ‘green machine.’” The freedom and release of prayerful confession sets me free to move to the next step.

**Rejoice!** The surest solution for feeling down is looking up. “Celebrating with others who succeed is energizing for me,” one of my colleagues has discovered. Another friend wisely points out, “If one person succeeds, there isn’t less to go around. The truth is, there’s more available because they got the ball rolling!”

I keep a stack of postcards ready to send out when I hear of someone’s success. The postage stamps are already on them so I can’t change my mind after I’ve written, “Way to go, my friend!” (What, and waste forty-one cents?!)

“I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Phil. 4:4).



## Relationships at Work

### Who, Me? Jealous?

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**Stay on task.** My obsession with “who’s on first?” means I’m diverting attention better spent on my own calling. “I make sure my own work is solid,” one woman wrote. “What others do is God’s business, not mine.” Another wise soul decided to “take all the time and emotional energy I used to waste on jealousy and put that energy into doing a better job.”

No doubt about it, the effort wasted on fighting the green giant is significant, which is why I’ve posted on my office wall that important Eleventh Commandment: “Thou shalt not whine.”

**Be patient.** If you’re not in the spotlight, count your blessings—including the freedom to not have all the answers. “I’m in process, in training,” a friend of mine has realized. “Every time something good comes my way, the Lord is widening my boundaries, in His time, in His way.”

Many a career or ministry has collapsed under too much, too soon. I’m slowly learning to relax with the tasks I’ve been given rather than long for something bigger, better, or faster. Scripture tells us, “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded” (Luke 12:48). Sometimes less is already enough to worry about!

**Befriend your “rival.”** Not to be confused with “love your enemy,” this good advice has made all the difference for me. As one peer put it, “I try to see the ‘winner’ as a person, not a competitor. This helps me feel joyful, rather than resentful ... usually.” Another woman has found that “taking the initiative to get to know the woman behind the headlines has transformed my green-eyed monster into a cheerleader.” One professional woman who thought she’d just met her biggest rival “heard God’s voice saying, ‘She’s smart, energetic, and sharp ... just like you. You could be best buddies.’ It was a revelation! We’ve developed a wonderful, lasting friendship.”

**Plan ahead.** Taking care of ourselves is also good insurance against a roving green eye. “If I exhaust myself, skip quiet times with the Lord, forget to exercise, or neglect the friendships that uplift me, negative emotions like envy can get a foothold,” admitted one woman. Personally, I’ve found that when I’m worn out, envy not only gets a foothold, it takes hold of my mouth as well.

Finding partners to fight the good fight with has proven to be productive. One woman offered her specific strategy: “Twelve of us who share the same profession formed a covenant two years ago to pray for each other and meet annually. It’s hard to be jealous when you have this kind of accountability.” My own solution is a more modern thing: I meet with a small group of Christian writers online. When we laugh, cry, confess, and rejoice with each other, the seeds of jealousy are crushed before they can take root.



**Lean on the Lord.** What a relief to know I no longer need to fight this battle myself, since the Lord stands ready, willing, and able to conquer my sin through the power of His Spirit. “The Lord is sovereign, and we cannot add one inch to our stature, physically or any other way,” a good friend recently reminded me. “He guides us every step and His ways are perfect. It has nothing to do with us!”

It’s been said that “comparisons are never productive unless Christ is the mirror.” He is the One who is “jealous” for us, desiring that our whole heart, mind, body, and soul be focused on Him. A friend who admitted to once being a nine on the jealousy scale is now happily living at a one: “The more we hear His voice and are settled in what He is calling us to do, the less we are vulnerable to envy and jealousy,” she says. “If we keep a grateful heart, we can rejoice when others succeed!”

The ultimate litmus test was the day I opened my e-mail to discover a post from a dear friend who was meeting with two Hollywood honchos to discuss turning her book into a movie. A movie!?! The “old Liz” would have turned the air green with jealousy, but the “new Liz in Christ” tapped into the keyboard, “Praise God for His blessings on your work, my friend” ... *and meant every word!*

I wept with joy for her success, and in a small way, for my own victory over a foe that has plagued me for years. As long as I remember to confess, rejoice, and lean on Him, I can sing “To God Be the Glory”—and hit every note.

*Liz Curtis Higgs is the author of numerous books. A busy conference and retreat speaker, Liz lives with her family in Kentucky. This article first appeared in the September/October 1997 issue of TODAY’S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine.*

### Thought Provokers

- Which coworkers or situations press your jealous button? What advice in this article will help you combat that jealousy in the future?
- How do you combat jealousy at work?
- 1 Thessalonians 5:11 says, “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up ...” In what ways can you encourage and build up your “rivals” at work?



# FEATURES



## Do I Have to Pray for Her?

Here are the benefits when you do.

by Cheri Fuller

When my friend Karen was a director for a film festival, she hired an office assistant named Terry. Although Terry interviewed well, before long she was slamming doors, yelling, crying, and ignoring Karen's requests.

Karen told me that her repeated attempts to talk with Terry about her attitude did nothing. Finally one night, when Terry called Karen's home to complain that she'd had enough of her boss' "demands," Jim, Karen's husband, answered the phone. Terry was so rude to him that Karen said, "Tell her I've had enough. She does not need to come back to work." Terry flew into a rage and slammed down the phone.

At first Karen told me she didn't feel anything but anger toward her "enemy." After all, Terry deserved to be fired. But in sheer obedience to a Bible passage she'd read in Matthew 5:44, "When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer" (*The Message*), Karen began praying for Terry. As she prayed, her anger dissipated. She sensed there must be a wounded person behind those outbursts. Three months and many prayers later, Karen invited Terry to lunch. There Karen learned about how Terry had been the victim of severe abuse and neglect while growing up. Both women cried; they experienced reconciliation, and amazingly, began a friendship.

Sooner or later, you'll be confronted with a person who rubs you the wrong way, as Karen did. Despite your best intentions, the other person becomes your adversary. Perhaps she talked behind your back at church, mounted a campaign against you in the PTA, or hurt you in other ways. She could be your mother-in-law, a neighbor, or former friend.



### **What's In It for You**

As difficult as it is to pray for your “enemy,” here’s why it’s important to do so:

#### **You’re drawn closer to God.**

Last year, I had an unexpected conflict with a woman during some preparations for a community event we were both a part of. Although I intended no harm, I inadvertently offended Kim (not her real name) by something I said, and she told me so in no uncertain terms. While I apologized, Kim remained aloof and unfriendly and said some hurtful things about me behind my back that I eventually heard. God and I had a few conversations about Kim. I would have loved for Him to change her. In fact, I asked Him to several times. But instead, He suggested I pray blessings on her life whenever her name came to mind. One day I said, “Lord, you could have reconciled us before now. What’s up?” His quiet whisper seemed to say, *You wouldn’t have come to me nearly so much lately were it not for Kim!*

Nothing’s changed yet with the relationship—but I’ve realized praying for her is drawing me closer to God.

#### **You experience heart-change.**

Because of her commitment to prayer, by the time my friend Karen met her “enemy,” Terry, for lunch and heard her story, she actually wanted to hug Terry. Three months before, Karen was nowhere near that response. In following Jesus’ command to “pray for our enemies,” God slowly filled Karen’s heart with His love for Terry. She felt compassion when all she’d felt before was hurt, anger, and frustration.

#### **You see God at work.**

When Karen invited God into her rocky relationship with Terry through prayer, He did more than she could have asked or thought (Ephesians 3:20) by paving the way for a friendship where hostility had once existed. Often this is what God does when we take our hands off and give a person or situation to Him. When Karen saw in a tangible way how God could turn a bad situation into something good, her faith was boosted enormously.

#### **You find forgiveness.**

Jesus says in the Lord’s Prayer (Luke 11:2-4) that by the measure we forgive others, we’re forgiven. Praying for our enemies teaches us a real-life lesson in forgiveness. As I prayed daily for Kim, I was able to release my hurt instead of hold onto it. God gradually replaced my anger with forgiveness. No, it wasn’t overnight—but in the process of praying for my enemy, God reminded me of how much He had forgiven me. And the conflict made me become newly aware



of how much I need God's mercy and forgiveness every day.

**You feel better emotionally and physically.**

Studies show that one minute of anger can sap the emotional energy of a normal eight-hour period. And most of us need all the energy we can muster!

Elaine, a woman I know, learned through a painful divorce that she couldn't live with resentment. She experienced the physical toll of anger. As things got worse between Elaine and her ex-husband, she was plagued by insomnia, depression, and high blood pressure. It took months of counseling for her to deal with her anger, forgive her ex, and get her blood pressure back to normal.

So later, when a coworker named Bonnie spread lies about her, Elaine knew where to go—to her knees. Praying each morning before work, Elaine gave God her hurt feelings but also asked Him to fill this woman with His peace. Although the barbs continued for several months, Elaine could sleep at night. And, eventually, she was promoted to a position that took her out of Bonnie's line of fire.

**As You Pray**

I've found the following tips help you when resentful feelings boil up:

**Take a "time-out."**

Consider writing down the specific offenses and how you feel about them. Don't try to sugarcoat the situation or your feelings. Then commit the list to God, asking Him to heal your heart—and the other person's as well.

**Put feet to your prayers.**

As you pray, listen for God to tell you what action steps to take. In Elaine's case, when Christmas rolled around several months into her praying for Bonnie, she felt God nudging her to do something kind for her. She decided to buy a gift book by Bonnie's favorite artist and give it to her for Christmas. Another friend, Melinda, was betrayed by her best friend, Jane. Months passed with no communication between them. Even though she didn't "feel" like it, Melinda prayed for Jane's life. Then, after several nudgings by God, she decided to write a prayer of blessing and send it to Jane.

After receiving it, Jane called Melinda, and the walls between them crumbled. She thought Melinda had assumed the worst about her, but now saw how she really cared. Gradually, the two women are re-building the relationship, but it was the prayer of blessing that brought the breakthrough.



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#### **Be expectant.**

Jesus declared that when we follow His way of dealing with our enemies, we'll never regret it. That's why He tells us to "live out this God-created identity the way our Father lives toward us, generously and graciously, even when we're at our worst. Our Father is kind; you be kind" (Luke 6:28, 35, *The Message*).

When we obey Christ's command to pray for our enemies, we not only receive rewards in heaven, but blessings in this life. We'll be freer emotionally, healthier physically, and more able to experience the joy of Jesus. We'll draw closer to Him, see Him work in amazing ways, and experience the power of forgiveness in our own life.

*Cheri Fuller, a TCW regular contributor and speaker, is the author of numerous books. This article first appeared in the November/December 2001 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine.*

#### **Thought Provokers**

- *How have you dealt with anger toward coworkers in the past? Was it helpful or did it add to the problem?*
- *In what ways can you pray for your biggest enemy at work?*
- *The author says, "When we obey Christ's command to pray for our enemies, we not only receive rewards in heaven, but blessings in this life." What kinds of blessings have you received as a result of praying for your enemies?*



# FEATURES



## It Happened to Me

**I never thought I'd experience sexual harassment.**

*by G. L. Klienhardt*

I didn't want the job in the first place. For six years I was a stay-at-home mom, but after months of budget cuts and a lot of denial, my husband and I faced the inevitable—we needed a second income.

Even as I searched the classifieds, I prayed constantly for God to rescue me from having to return to work. I dreaded the hours I'd have to spend away from my kids. I cried nearly every night. But the growing stack of bills didn't go away. I finally prayed, "Fine, God. If this is what you want, I'll do it." It was nothing close to a peaceful acceptance of God's will.

I sunk into depression and felt like a failure. So many other mothers managed to stay at home. Why couldn't I? I was angry with myself for not pursuing the freelance writing career I'd always planned. Now it was too late. We needed the income immediately.

My husband, Brad\*, called from work one day to give me a phone number. A coworker told him about a self-employed ordained minister who ran a national ministry from his home. He needed an administrative assistant. "He says Mr. Ray\* is a great guy, and the hours are flexible. You may even work at home sometimes," Brad told me.

My spirits lifted as I called the number. When I arrived at Mr. Ray's home for an interview, he led me down a narrow stairway into the basement. There were two offices separated by a library. When I learned I'd be Mr. Ray's only employee, I felt discomfort at the thought of working with him in this isolated setting.

But my reservations were soon laid to rest. Mr. Ray traveled for weeks at a time. Plus, he helped me set up my home office so I could work from there whenever possible. I set my own schedule. I thought I'd hit the jackpot when it came to family-friendly jobs! I thought,



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*God must have led me to this job. He gave me what I needed—an income without a lot of hours away from home.*

Several weeks into my new job, Mr. Ray walked into my office and asked me a question. When I turned to him, he gave me an odd look, then stopped mid-sentence. “What?” I asked.

He explained reluctantly that my beautiful eyes were distracting. “They take my breath away,” he said, “and I can’t think.”

That night I asked Brad what he thought of Mr. Ray’s revelation. “That’s kind of weird,” he said. “It’s not like he was hitting on you, right?”

“Right,” I said with confidence. I believed Mr. Ray wasn’t trying to “start something.” He seemed happily married, and was old enough to be my father.

But after a few months, he was complimenting me daily, saying things such as, “Oh good, you’re wearing your hair up the way I like it.” Just when it started to bother me, he’d leave on a trip. I’d relax again, reminding myself how fortunate I was to have a job with such freedom. I tried to count my blessings. Every day I read letters from people thanking Mr. Ray for making a difference in their life. I was part of that.

When we started meeting some of Mr. Ray’s associates for lunch, he and his colleagues seemed to appreciate my suggestions. When the others left, Mr. Ray and I would frequently stick around to review the notes I’d taken. This gradually turned into lunch meetings at which only Mr. Ray and I were present. Though it did feel odd to be in a restaurant alone with a man other than my husband, we did some of our best strategizing over steak and salad. *Isn’t this what business people do every day?* I reasoned.

After a while, I realized I was increasingly self-conscious every time I walked in the office. The compliments didn’t stop, whether they were about my work or my appearance. Without analyzing why, I stopped wearing mascara and perfume to work. I tried not to initiate conversations with Mr. Ray.

He began to tell me personal things. He once confided he’d met a young woman he’d encountered online. She’d been sexually abused, and he counseled her. He explained there was nowhere else to talk privately, so they ended up in her hotel room, stretched out on her bed. “Many pastors would say I shouldn’t have done this,” he said, “but it’s important for this girl to see there are men she can trust. She told me it was the first time she’d been alone with a man and he hadn’t made a move on her.”



Mr. Ray had many such stories, and I never knew what to say.

I didn't have the nerve to tell him my true opinion: He was playing with fire.

Then Mr. Ray took things further. Once, while preparing for a business trip, he joked, "I'll be sitting in a hot tub, thinking about you."

"Thanks," I said awkwardly.

"Actually, I'd better not think about you there, or I'll picture you in a bikini. I better not go there."

My only response was to leave the room. I hadn't been in the working world much before, so I told myself this went with the territory. *I'm not going to be a prude and overreact to some innocent joking*, I thought.

Even so, I got up the courage to confide in my neighbor, a Christian woman who'd been in the work force for 20 years. She took a big-sister approach: "You get used to stuff like that when you've been out there as long as I have. If you want to keep a job in this world, you can't be so sensitive. Toughen up! It's not like you see him every day, like some women do. As long as you're not attracted to him, you'll be fine."

Knowing I wasn't attracted to Mr. Ray made me feel safe. Furthermore, the fact I was nearly 100 pounds overweight made me sure I was misreading his signals. I decided to "toughen up."

Nevertheless, every time Mr. Ray made me uncomfortable, I told my husband. Brad wasn't thrilled. "He dates my wife more than I do," he said once, referring to my lunch meetings with my boss.

"Do you want me to quit?" I asked.

"I can't afford to take you out like that, so it hurts me a little. But I don't want to be selfish, especially since your lunch dates for the last six years have been peanut butter and jelly with the kids. Besides, you're enjoying the work. Where else could you find a job with this kind of flexibility? It's your choice."

Finally, two things forced me to make a decision. One day Mr. Ray and I met with a woman who supported the ministry. Later, Mr. Ray told me that 20 years ago he almost married her. Because she was seriously ill, she broke off the engagement. He told me about her health problems and surgeries, finally relating to me her breast reduction surgery. I was stunned when he began commenting on her breast size. I held up a hand and said, "No. Don't tell me anymore. Please."



Saying no to Mr. Ray for the first time gave me a new feeling of strength. I realized then I'd put up with too much for too long. *Today was a good start*, I told myself. *It's my own fault this has gone on so long.*

I'd been at my job nearly eight months, and I now decided I wouldn't stay longer than a year. But since this was my first job in many years, I felt it was important to leave with a good referral. So, I forced myself to be okay with things, at least for a while longer.

Not long after that resolution, Mr. Ray brought up another red-flag subject. He explained he had a chat-room ministry. It was his "calling" to help insecure women feel beautiful, writing them daily, and even meeting some of them. He found these women at chat rooms for large women. "Big is beautiful," he said, "and these women need to hear that." A light went on in my head, accompanied by a sinking feeling in my stomach.

Then he began talking about me, saying he enjoyed making me feel good about myself. He said, "Hey, if I can make you feel sexy, what's the harm in that? You have a husband at home—it's not like anything would ever come of it."

I felt ill. It sounded like the classic test-the-waters statement. Was he trying to get me to say something he wanted to hear? He was on dangerous ground; it took me a while to realize I was, too.

As the shock wore off, I gathered my things and said I had to leave. He acted confused, and asked me to stay and talk, but I already was walking up the stairs.

I felt strange, and I heard a voice in my head saying, *Leave right now.*

Later at home, I announced to my husband I wasn't going back. He hugged me tightly. His relief was obvious. "If you felt so strongly," I asked him, "why didn't you insist I leave?"

"I guess I never wanted you to say I made you quit," he said. "But I'm telling you, that man was on my last nerve!"

I wrote Mr. Ray a letter, telling him how uncomfortable I'd been with the way he'd conducted himself. I expressed regret that I hadn't said anything sooner. It was a difficult letter to write; I felt like a coward. Wasn't I two-faced, listening for months like a friend while keeping my true thoughts to myself? However, all confusion died the minute I signed my name. I was free!



I never spoke to Mr. Ray again, but he did write me a letter in reply. Part of it was whiny, asking me to remember all he'd done for me. I felt he was trying to make me feel guilty. The other part was an apology. "My conscience is clear," he said. "If I'm guilty of anything, it's of being unwise. I've learned a hard lesson."

I have, too. Several.

#### **I'm not always as strong as I think.**

I never thought I was naive, but even the most sensible woman can have a blind spot. My depression, undiagnosed until several weeks after I quit, made me even more vulnerable. Plus, I never confided in my pastor, sisters, or mother about my concerns. I feared they'd tell me to leave right away, and I didn't believe they could possibly understand my situation. After all, they were financially and emotionally stable. But those who care the most about us, especially if they're not close to the situation, are precisely the people to turn to. We need wise counsel in times of turmoil.

#### **I'm quite often stronger than I think.**

I felt I'd already failed at my job as a mother (I wasn't home), and as a writer (I didn't try hard enough). These insecurities left me susceptible to Mr. Ray's compliments. Afraid I might not find another job, or I might not be liked if I spoke up, I allowed myself to believe I was only successful because Mr. Ray believed in me. It wasn't true. I had it in me all along, but like many women, I felt trapped. I couldn't see all my options. Men who harass are master manipulators. Our strongest defense lies in these two areas: our God-given intuition, and faith in our value in Christ.

#### **Honesty saves time and stress.**

The biggest thing I did right was tell my husband absolutely everything. However, I should have been more honest in how I reacted to my boss' subtle advances. I should have asked him early on not to comment on my appearance or share such personal stories. Studies show that in a surprisingly high number of cases—up to 90 percent—the harasser will stop when confronted directly. This is especially true if it's a fairly "mild" level of harassment, such as off-color jokes, excessive comments on appearance, or repeated requests for dates. It's not easy, but women need to be bold in drawing boundaries with men. It might be embarrassing, even scary, but we must remember we've done the right thing.

Having gained the perspective that comes with time and distance, I'm embarrassed I stayed in that job so long. After a crying jag that lasted two days, I sought help from a Christian counselor. Counseling and antidepressants cleared away the confusion and discouragement, allowing me to see life with hope. Most



importantly, I was able to understand how close God really was at the time I felt so alone. His protection and leading were always there, but profound self-doubt caused me to mistrust what I sensed.

The emotional strength I once lacked increases every day, but I guard it. Now that I know I'm prone to depression, I exercise, consistently study the Bible, pray, and seek counseling when needed. Knowing more about sexual harassment makes me stronger as well. I've learned my reactions were typical of most women in this situation.

I've been back home with my kids for several years now and have finally launched my writing career. The peace I have is my confirmation that, for now, I'm right where I should be. Should I ever choose to re-enter the workforce, I'll enter it a much wiser, bolder person.

*G. L. Klienhardt is a pseudonym for a freelance writer living in Arizona. This article first appeared in the **November/December 2001** issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine.*

### Thought Provokers

- *Where do you draw the line between "innocent," off-the-cuff comments or jokes and sexual harassment?*
- *What is your company's policy on sexual harassment? If you don't know, find out.*
- *If you are ever in a situation where you're being sexually harassed, who will you go to for help?*



# FEATURES



## The Power of a Positive Word

5 ways to encourage those around you.

by Kathy Widenhouse

It was day 30 of our 48-day U.S. Marine Band concert tour. As I dragged my suitcase and instrument through the hotel to the tour bus waiting outside, I replayed my last telephone conversation with my husband, Brett. He'd described how our son had taken his first steps yesterday, while I was five states away. As I stood in the pouring rain, waiting to board the bus that would take us to our next stop, I thought about the performances that remained before I'd get to be with my family again.

Then I noticed a colleague also waiting to board the bus. I smiled and said, "Good morning."

Wet from the rain, he reached to help me with my suitcase and said simply, "Thanks for your smile."

Surprised by his comment, I stared at him. Like me, he must have expected the usual prickly behavior from coworkers this far into a trip.

"It's easy to get depressed when you're away from home this long," he said. "But your smile cheers me."

In the midst of a grueling routine and homesickness, my spirits rose. I grinned the whole morning and was buoyed for days—all because of my colleague's remark.

This isn't the first time another person's encouraging words have affected me deeply. During college and graduate school, I studied with two private music instructors, both of international reputation. Each used words that produced an entirely different outcome in my life.



## Relationships at Work

### The Power of a Positive Word

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My first teacher employed put-downs to communicate. I don't recall one positive statement he said, but I do remember these words ringing in my ears: "You'll never get a job. You have too many technical problems to fix." Every week, I left my lesson in despair, ready to quit.

The other instructor praised my strengths while addressing my weaknesses. In that studio, I regularly heard statements such as, "Your rhythm's excellent in this passage. Now let's develop your tone quality here." Through his eyes, I saw a future for myself as a musician. My progress skyrocketed.

Years later, as I thought of ways to encourage my students, I tried to pinpoint the difference between those two professors. I found it in Ephesians 4:29: "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."

As a Christian, I want my words to have a positive impact on the people I encounter, people like I am, who are trying to build meaningful lives but who often hit the roadblock of discouragement. As I reflect on the kind of words that built me up during college and beyond, I've decided to make them a regular part of my vocabulary. Use them to build up those around you, too.

### Words That Applaud

Encouraging words remind me of applause—both are audible and affirming. Yet the ovations I cherish most aren't ones offered by strangers in concert halls; they're compliments from people who know me well. Here are treasures I've stored over the years:

"We're thrilled our son married you."

"One word to describe my mommy? She's nice!"

"Your creativity made our Bible class come alive."

"It's great to have you on our team."

These words make me want to be the best wife, mom, volunteer, and employee I can be.

How powerful *is* a heartfelt compliment? In the book *Something to Think About*, author Dr. Raymond McHenry tells of a young nineteenth-century Londoner who battled poverty. He worked at a warehouse at age 12, hopped through menial jobs, and nearly gave up his dream of becoming a writer.

Then an editor published one of his stories and sent the young man a note. In it, he scribbled an apology for not being able to pay for the essay, but added something



far more valuable—a message complimenting his writing and requesting more manuscripts.

Without that editor's positive words, we might never have had the opportunity to read such masterpieces as *A Christmas Carol*, *Oliver Twist*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*. His praise was a turning point in the life of Charles Dickens.

#### **Words That Exhort**

The music teacher who encouraged me reminds me of an enthusiastic coach who cheers a teammate on even when the game's not going her way. I hear similar cheers of encouragement in a colleague's quick "Hang in there" when my schedule's too full, or in a friend's exhortation, "Don't give up," when I share my parenting woes.

My coworker Deb experienced the power of a positive word when she worried aloud about coping with an unexpected pregnancy on top of her husband's demanding job, her erratic work schedule, and two children already at home. "An acquaintance heard me, and reminded me about some mutual friends—a couple who were raising their toddler and infant triplets successfully. 'If they can do it,' she told me, 'so can you.'"

That encouragement, Deb told me, was the inspiration she needed when her baby was born nine months later.

#### **Words That Support**

Many people envision a seven-week concert tour as glamorous. And part of it is. But in reality, it's also an emotional and physical endurance test. So when I prepared to leave my child to go on tour for the first time since I'd become a mom, I knew I needed support.

As I shared my request for support with my prayer partners, I choked up. As I sobbed, one friend got up, walked around the table, put her arms around me, and said, "God will get you through this." It was just the comfort I needed to start the tour.

#### **Words That Appreciate**

Some of my favorite verbal applause comes cloaked in two words: "Thank you." There are dozens of opportunities to express appreciation daily. When I thanked my preteen for loading the dishwasher, she gave me a high-five; the librarian beamed when I thanked her for locating a book at another branch.

True appreciation is grateful rather than merely polite. It acknowledges value.

"I'm sneezing, coughing, and blowing my nose," my husband told me once while I was away. "I miss you taking care of me. Thanks for all you do for me."



Just two little words—*thank you*—make me feel treasured and appreciated.

### **Words That Point to God**

These words qualify as the standing ovation of verbal applause. When I'm discouraged, they point me toward the Great Encourager.

When I was at my lowest point with the difficult teacher, I revealed my anguish to a friend. The next day she left a note in my mailbox. It read, “‘For I know the plans I have for you’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future’” (Jeremiah 29:11). Those words became my lifeline. I clung to them while I finished my degree, entered graduate school, met the teacher who encouraged me, and became gainfully employed.

Words that point to God produce strong aftershocks even when the encourager remains anonymous. Such was the case for Soviet author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who was exiled to a Siberian prison camp in 1945 for making a derogatory comment about Stalin.

According to one source, so great was Solzhenitsyn's despair that he decided to stop the work assigned to him and allow the guards to beat him to death.

As he paused, an unnamed inmate reached over and drew a cross in the dirt. Invigorated by the hope this symbol of the Christian faith imparted, Solzhenitsyn resumed digging. After his eventual release from the prison camp, Solzhenitsyn went on to survive a cancerous tumor he'd developed in prison, and to win the Nobel Prize for literature in 1970.

Encouragers typically think they're in the business of spurring on others. Yet on day 31 of my 48-day tour, I discovered the ministry of encouragement has a surprising by-product: joy for the giver.

The next morning, I spotted my colleague lifting his suitcase into the bus. “Thanks for your kind words yesterday,” I said. “You really encouraged me.”

His face lit up, and my heart soared.

Both he and I experienced the truth found in Proverbs 15:23: “A man finds joy in giving an apt reply—and how good is a timely word!”

*Kathy Widenhouse, a flutist for the U.S. Marine Band, lives with her family in Maryland. This article first appeared in the May/June 2002 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine.*



## **Relationships at Work**

### The Power of a Positive Word

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#### **Thought Provokers**

- *Think of three encouraging things people at work have said to you lately. How did they impact you?*
- *Think of three encouraging things you have said to people at work lately. How did they impact you?*
- *Which of your coworkers needs a word of encouragement right now? How can you encourage that person?*



# FEATURES



## A Spiritual Growth Industry

More than ever, Christians are bringing faith to bear in the for-profit world.

by Brad A. Greenberg

Mike Valleskey was struggling to understand how his job at Sears fit into his new life of faith. Valleskey hadn't been asked to perform unethically or kept at work so late he lost touch with his family. But he couldn't see how a disciple of Jesus Christ could work 9 to 5 inside an office with such a large mission field outside.

"I contemplated going back to Bible school," Valleskey tells CT. But before making the jump, he looked at his sphere of influence—his wife and four children, no surprise there, but the next one blew him away. "The workplace," says Valleskey, who now leads a Christian fellowship at Sears with 150 members. "I was around 5,000 people, every day, 40-plus hours [a week]."

Welcome to Faith in the Workplace 101, one of the fastest growing arenas of Christian ministry. If nonprofits are learning lessons from former for-profit execs, it's also true that Christian workers are learning how better to bring their faith into the for-profit world.

Like many before, and even more since, Valleskey discovered in 1994 that his largest mission field was inside a Chicago office building. He didn't need a Master of Divinity degree. He just needed to work with a higher mission than receiving that Friday paycheck.

"People don't just want to park their car [and] their soul in the lot outside. They want their personal values, their faith values, to be aligned with the values of the office," says David W. Miller, executive director of Yale University's Center for Faith and Culture and author of the book *God at Work* (Oxford, 2006). "They don't want to live a compartmentalized life.

That much has become clear. With an explosion of regular Bible studies meeting in American offices, the number of nonprofits supporting those Bible studies has mushroomed to more



than 800, according to the International Coalition of Workplace Ministries (ICWM). In 2000, there were 79 books published about faith and work; ICWM has counted 2,000 titles in the past two years. The next new position to be salaried at larger churches will be seminary-trained pastors of workplace ministry, says Stephen Christensen, founder of Concordia University's Center for Faith and Business.

"This will be one of the major issues that will determine the history of the church," says Kent Humphreys, president of the Fellowship of Companies for Christ International.

The business community has taken notice. Articles about increasing expressions of faith at work have appeared on the cover of *BusinessWeek* and in *Fortune*, *Newsweek*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *The New York Times*, among others.

### **Ignorance About Rights**

Still, the market has substantial room for growth, experts say, largely because Christian employers and employees are ignorant about religious protections under the law—and many work hard to refrain from any overt religious expression

"Most Christians sort of cower at this toothless lion called separation of church and state, because they don't understand their freedom and their limits," says Os Hillman, president of ICWM.

That's where Brad Dacus steps into the picture. The founder and president of Pacific Justice Institute, a legal-defense organization, Dacus travels throughout California and occasionally out of state to provide free seminars about what Christians can and can't do at work.

Under federal law, Dacus says, employees can share their faith with non-Christian employees off the clock, use available conference rooms for meetings before work and during breaks, keep religious items on their desks, and redirect union dues to a charity.

Employers have even more latitude. They can begin a chaplaincy, hold Christian-themed corporate retreats, sponsor summer Bible camps for employees' children, and establish scholarships to selected Christian colleges, says Dacus.

But Dacus notes the limitations. "It has to be voluntary, and no employee can ever be punished for not participating in a religious-based activity."



Many Christian workplace fellowships are served by ministries like ICWM, the Fellowship of Companies for Christ, and Christian Business Men's Committee.

But there are also private businesses that add a Christian touch to client services. Giant Partners, an Oklahoma City-based growth consulting firm, helps clients improve their businesses by using a model Jesus lays out in Matthew 9 and 10—whether the company is Christian-led or not. Giant enters a village (business) and tries to heal the sick (fix problems), cast out demons (alleviate anxiety), and preach the Good News (encourage executives to live righteously).

“If we can transform CEOs, it will affect all their employees,” says Giant cofounder Jeremie Kubicek.

At the Coca-Cola Company, Christians have congregated for a weekly Bible study for as long as anyone can remember. What was a small group now numbers 429 people at the global headquarters in Atlanta and in field offices. Coke—which recently promoted the creation of affinity groups such as the African American Forum, Hispanic Employee Forum, and Women's Forum—has quietly supported the Coca-Cola Christian Fellowship, which began in 2001.

The global headquarters fellowship meets in an open conference room each Wednesday during lunch. Members host occasional lectures after work led by successful Christian business leaders. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the fellowship donated supplies, furniture, food, and clothing to a colleague's extended family. And when an executive assistant's daughter was hospitalized and near death after a car crash, the fellowship asked its members for prayer. She recovered.

“The No. 1 thing a Christian can do is live our faith, so people can see our faith coming through. That is going to be the biggest witness. It is not through banging on a person's door and saying, “The only way to heaven is Jesus Christ,”” says Steve Hyland, director of retail merchandising for Coca-Cola North America and leader of its Christian fellowship. “It's living it versus saying it.”

*Brad A. Greenberg is a religion reporter for the Los Angeles Daily News. This article first appeared in the **March 2007** issue of *CHRISTIANITY TODAY* magazine.*



**Thought Provokers**

- *How do you express your faith at work?*
- *In what ways do you see your place of work as a mission field?*
- *How can you be a part of supporting or beginning a Christian fellowship or Bible study at your workplace?*





## Additional Resources

### *Books to help you further*

🌀 **The Church in the Workplace: How God’s People Can Transform Society** by C. Peter Wagner (Gospel Light, 2006; 206 pages). Wagner explores how the role of the church in the work life of believers is just as much a ministry, a service to God—even worship, as what believers do on Sunday in their local churches.

🌀 **Encouragement: The Key to Caring** by Larry Crabb and Dan Allender (Zondervan, 1990; 144 pages). Drs. Crabb and Allender have filled this book with practical instruction on how to master the basic form of counseling Christians are called to do, following the New Testament admonition to “encourage one another.”

🌀 **Prayers That Avail Much For the Workplace** by Germaine Copeland (Harrison House, 2001; 304 pages). Here is a “Business Handbook of Scriptural Prayer” designed specifically for the workplace. Through collaboration with a corporate CEO committed to ministry and to God’s service, Copeland offers a smorgasbord of prayers for employers, employees, and personal concerns.

🌀 **Staying True in a World of Lies: Practical Models of Integrity for Women in the Workplace** by Julie-Allyson Ieron (Wingspread, 2002; 224 pages). Filled with real-life stories, *Staying True* addresses the tightrope balance between personal integrity and success in the workplace.



## Relationships at Work

### Additional Resources

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 **Stop the Runaway Conversation** by Michael D. Sedler (Baker, 2001; 224 pages). Do your conversations empower or destroy? Negative speech affects every home, church and workplace. This book will help you to use words that bring healing and hope, and put the brakes on runaway conversations.

 **The Ten Commandments of Working in a Hostile Environment** by T.D. Jakes (Berkley, 2005; 176 pages). Bishop Jakes explains how you can rise above petty conflicts, turn obstacles into opportunities, and let God do His work in your life every day - even when you're coping with complaining coworkers or difficult bosses.

