

Ask Aleksandra

Dear Aleksandra,

At first I thought this must be my imagination, but it keeps on happening. I have a female colleague in my department who, despite my efforts to befriend her, makes a point of contradicting me and/or besting me in front of other faculty members (male and female) on a regular basis. And she and I both serve on the Women's Studies Steering Committee! Whatever happened to sisterhood? I really don't know how to respond to her behavior, or even whether I should respond. Since I am always taken by surprise when it occurs, so far I have just let it pass.

Anna B

Dear Anna B,

There are abundant examples of wonderful women colleagues out there, but we've all heard—or even experienced firsthand—the horror stories of hazing by senior women who were themselves put through the ringer and would sooner stab themselves in the eye with a hot poker than give a junior female colleague a helping hand. We hold out the hope of solidarity with other women, but it doesn't always come to pass.

Your letter did not specify whether your colleague—we'll call her Olga—is at the same stage of her career or not, but this information is vital to gauging your response. Let's be blunt. If she is senior, you'd better bite your tongue and put on a smile for now. Even if you are both junior, I would encourage you not to take the bait of her petty one-upmanship (one-upwomanship?), because you don't want to get dragged into a drama in front of senior colleagues. I suspect it is not the case that you are senior to her, but if you are, you could have a gentle, mentoring word with her about collegiality, but that could go very wrong, very quickly. Proceed with caution and an extra helping of tact. In sum, the power relation may explain why you take the course you do, but the end result is always the same. Someone has to be the grownup and it looks like it is going to have to be you.

You note that you have tried to “befriend” Olga, but perhaps continued pursuit of this effort is a mistake. It is natural enough to seek friendships at work, where we spend a lot of time with people who share our professional interests. But don't confuse colleagues with friends. It's like squares and rectangles—some of your friends may be colleagues, but not all colleagues will be friends. You need to get along well enough with Olga to work together effectively on committee business, but you might want to let go of any hopes you harbor of being friends. Whatever the reason, however irrational or disappointing or betraying of the sisterhood it may be, it sounds like she's just not that into you. And that doesn't strike me as much of a loss for you.

In comradeship,
Aleksandra