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An important element of most jobs is commonly described as collegiality, which refers to the manner in which colleagues interact with one another. Sometimes those interactions involve socializing, but often they have some work-related component. Being considered a good colleague can make the difference in promotion and salary decisions and, consequently, have a major impact on a career.

But many people do not understand why collegiality is so valued by organizations and have no idea how to become better colleagues themselves. Some do not even make a pretense of trying to be a good colleague.

In academe and elsewhere, many people would benefit substantially if they learned to become better colleagues. But what does it mean to be a good colleague? Is collegiality just another way of sucking up to the boss? Why do higher education institutions place such weight on collegiality? How can someone improve their collegiality and become a more valuable member of their college or university?

My definition of a good colleague is someone who adds value to an organization in ways that go beyond the specified requirements of their job. For example, in an academic setting, every professor has

to teach a certain number of classes and is expected -- at least at research-oriented universities -- to regularly produce first-rate research. But equally important for a college or university to function well are many other tasks that are not explicitly spelled out. Such tasks include developing curricula, supervising students' research and helping other faculty improve theirs, actively participating in research seminars, advising student clubs, and interacting with the world outside the institution.

The value of these noncontractable services provided by collegiality is sufficiently high that organizations reward individuals who provide them. In colleges and universities, if tenure cases are close, collegiality can be the difference between an individual receiving or not receiving tenure. There are many aspects of almost all jobs that are not specified in job descriptions but need to be done. Even if an institution does not state explicitly that it will be a factor considered in performance evaluation, collegiality almost always matters and has a meaningful effect on promotion and salary decisions.

Collegiality vs. Office Politics

Often, however, when an institution awards someone for their collegiality, people misconstrue it as "office politics." In a stereotypical example of office politics, an employee hangs out with the more senior people, laughs at their jokes, agrees with everything they say and does anything the senior people want. Eventually, that person becomes a favorite and is promoted for that reason. That pattern of behavior is observed in many settings and often does contribute to undeserved rewards.

Collegiality, though, is distinct from office politics, at least using the

definitions of each that I just mentioned. Being collegial means cooperating and helping out in informal ways. When people are collegial, the office functions better and everyone is better off. In contrast, the term “office politics” usually refers to the use of informal relationships to get ahead, most often at the expense of others. It creates resentment and dysfunction. Collegiality is productive, while office politics is destructive.

The distinction between collegiality and office politics is complicated by the social aspect of each. Both collegiality and office politics often work through socialization -- by, say, going to lunch together or meeting outside work. Conversations in those setting can be productive -- many research ideas and discussions about everyday problems that arise are addressed through informal discussions. But such socialization can also be used to curry favor with superiors.

Becoming a Good Colleague

The best way to think about collegiality is to focus not on the way one interacts, but on the value that the person adds when they do. While many people interact through socializing, it is possible to be a great colleague in other ways. One of my all-time favorite former colleagues never went to lunch, never met anyone off campus, basically never did any nonwork things with anyone from the university. But whenever anyone wrote a new research paper, they'd receive a copy a few days later in their mailbox with his handwriting all over it, containing detailed and very useful suggestions. For me and the others who were the beneficiaries, those suggestions were pure gold, and they improved our research substantially.

Each of us would benefit from an effort to become a better colleague. If we did so, our institutions would function better and

they would appreciate and reward what we did. Equally important, we would probably enjoy our jobs more. But how does one go about becoming a better colleague?

The thing to remember about being a good colleague is that everything is entirely voluntary. You can pick and choose what you want to do in terms of your collegueship. Often, a good place to start is by going to lunch with your colleagues and engaging in productive discussions about issues the group is facing. A surprising number of important decisions are made over the lunch table.

But some people don't like to eat lunch. Or they don't like to hear their colleagues go on and on about the local sports team -- or, worse, listen to loudly argued political viewpoints with which they disagree. If this is you, then skip lunch. But find another way to contribute productively.

You can do a variety of things. You can be like my former colleague and provide detailed feedback on other people's work. A couple I know well teach at a law school, are excellent chefs and every year make a point of inviting all their new colleagues over to dinner. Recently, there has been a movement among senior female faculty to help younger women progress through the potential pitfalls inherent in the too often sexist academic culture. All colleges and universities always have committees that need help, students who need advising, alumni who would love to maintain relationships with their alma mater and many other such valuable tasks that are not spelled out a faculty member's job description. You can always find things that you enjoy doing that contribute meaningfully to your environment.

Particularly important to contribute to in an academic environment

are things that relate to problematic aspects of the academic culture. Contributing to improving those issues is the mark of an exceptional colleague. There are many such problematic aspects, but let me highlight a few.

First, there is too often a nastiness to academic interactions that can be shocking to people outside the system. That nastiness is present when we are rude in seminars or faculty meetings, discuss each other's papers at conferences in an insulting or condescending manner, or treat each other in unprofessional ways at other times. When people from the business world take jobs in higher education, they are often astonished at the way academics act. Academics love to talk about how pure they are compared to the rest of the world, but the truth is that we engage in more than our share of self-serving, backstabbing behavior.

Second, academe is extremely hierarchical. Tenured professors are treated very well. But many courses, especially at large state universities, are taught by non-tenure-track lecturers and adjunct faculty, who have high teaching loads and low compensation. And staff almost always work extremely hard and are underpaid relative to what they could make in the for-profit sector. While we do not have control over compensation, we do have control over the way people are treated. A good colleague should work to ensure that everyone on their campus is given the respect they deserve. For example, at the end of every year, one of my colleagues takes the lead and organizes a collection for a holiday fund for the staff. Everyone is happy to contribute, but without this colleague's initiative, many of us would forget about the staff at a time when we are all very busy. By this simple act, this colleague makes an important contribution to the welfare of the department.

Third, despite being bastions of liberalism, colleges and universities still have far too much sexism and racism. Women and minorities are underrepresented and treated relatively poorly in many aspects of their professional lives. All faculty members, especially us white men, must work hard to make our institutions places where all races and genders feel welcome and appreciated.

To be a good colleague, you must find some productive way to contribute that goes beyond your direct job description. By doing so, you will benefit your co-workers and the organization you work for. But equally importantly, you will benefit yourself. Your colleagues will appreciate you more, your evaluations will improve and you will most likely enjoy your profession more.

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