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A co-worker is the boss's pet? Here's how to deal

Preferential treatment tops list of workers' complaints

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By [Ruth Mantell](#), MarketWatch

WASHINGTON (MarketWatch) — Watching the boss let a favored colleague head home early from the office, yet again, can be galling for those left behind. Also pretty annoying: the buddy-buddy chats by the water cooler.

If you've noticed that a co-worker is your boss's pet, you're not alone. Preferential treatment leads a list of types of misconduct observed by employees, according to new data from the Corporate Executive Board, an Arlington, Va.-based business research and advisory firm.

Among almost 69,000 U.S. employees surveyed in the first half of the year, 10.2% said they had observed preferential treatment within the past 12 months. That rate compares with 9% for inappropriate behavior and 7.6% for harassment, followed by other types of misconduct.

Of note, the data capture employee perceptions of this behavior, rather than substantiated reports. "That doesn't mean these observations are unimportant," according to the Corporate Executive Board. "Whether employees really saw preferential treatment or not, they believe that they saw it and that belief affects their behavior."

Preferential treatment is a broad category, describing behavior that is unequally applied to workers and can inequitably benefit recipients. At times, preferential treatment is obvious. For instance, your superior has given yet another plum assignment to a junior associate from his alma mater.

But some preferential treatment is difficult to detect. Lilly Ledbetter had worked at Goodyear Tire and Rubber for almost two decades before discovering that she was paid less than male peers.

“It’s hard to know, especially when you work in a place that prevents you from discussing your pay, and your superiors do not answer your questions about how you stand,” Ledbetter said.

Ledbetter sued, but in a controversial ruling the Supreme Court found that she had waited too long to file charges. In 2009 President Obama signed the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act into law, making it clear that each discriminatory paycheck presents a new opportunity to file charges.

While legal remedies exist when a law has been broken, experts say there are other strategies to deal with legal preferential treatment.

Focus on your work

When someone else receives preferential treatment, don’t get mad, get introspective, said Joel Garfinkle, an Oakland, Calif.-based executive coach and author of “Getting Ahead: Three Steps to Take Your Career to the Next Level.”

“When preferential treatment occurs, it’s easy for people to get jealous or resentful,” he said. “But it’s important to evaluate yourself and how you are being perceived in the company.”

Garfinkle suggested examining your weaknesses and trying to figure out how to improve and positively influence co-workers’ perceptions of your work.

Workers should avoid “hiding themselves” at work, he said. “The more details you tell your boss about your accomplishments, the less chance someone else can take credit for your efforts. When you hide yourself, you make others stand out.”

Workers should document their performance, said Tim Reed, human-resources director for U.S. sales and organization development at Ricoh Production Print Solutions. “If somebody came to me and said that so-and-so is getting preferential treatment, I’d also ask them whether they are meeting or beating expectations as a way to focus on one’s own performance,” Reed said.

Get political

Employees who are feeling neglected can work on their relationship with the boss.

“Someone who is willing to stay late, over time...will develop a loyalty and a sense of trust with a superior that other people simply don't have. This is performance-based 99% of the time,” said Charles Wardell, chief executive of Oak Brook, Ill.-based Witt/Kieffer, which specializes in executive searches for health-care, education and nonprofit organizations.

Garfinkle recommended recruiting advocates to tout your accomplishments and value to the company. “You can ask people within the company who have some influence and are respected to share their thoughts about your accomplishments,” he said. “If someone really appreciates the work you have done, they won't have an issue if you ask them to share that with your boss.”

It may be fair

Sometimes a lack of information can lead workers to misperceive that there's preferential treatment, Reed said. “We don't have the context to understand 100% how someone else is being treated. We're not in the same room with the person all day. We just don't always know what's going on.”

Furthermore, not all preferential treatment is necessarily unfair, experts say. “Even if you find out somebody is paid less or more, there may be legitimate nondiscriminatory reasons for the pay difference,” said Joseph Sellers, head of the civil rights and employment practice group at law firm Cohen Milstein Sellers & Toll in Washington, D.C.

Sometimes, workers deserve extra perks like more flexible hours, said Thomas Anderson, an employee-relations panelist at the Society for Human Resource Management and human-resources director for Houston Community College System.

“If you have somebody who is working very diligently, very hard, maybe doing extra work on the weekend, then you would tend to give more flexibility to that person,” Anderson said.

Ruth Mantell is a MarketWatch reporter based in Washington.

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