

Tap Dancing Around The Elephants — How Collusion Impacts Your Life at Work

One of the most insidious and destructive behaviors impacting life at work is *collusion*. Collusion occurs when two people tacitly agree to set aside their true selves in order to support some joint phoniness.

By colluding with someone, we allow one another to continue to feel emotionally safe. The price of this false safety is that both parties run often self-destructive, self-sabotaging, and limiting behaviors in order to gain acceptance, approval, recognition, and security.

Collusion is saying (only silently and covertly): “I’m going to let you behave the way you want or need, so I can feel good about our relationship — even though I know our collusive behaviors are inappropriate and self-destructive. I expect you to do the same for me.” Collusion is a type of fraud. It is both living a lie and supporting another to live his/her lie. Neither person “shows up” with integrity or authenticity. On a deeper level, it seeks to obscure — or, more usually, fake — who each person is, and how they relate to themselves and others. It is “business as usual” while carefully tap dancing around the elephants in the room.

What does collusion look like?

There are varied flavors of collusion. General expressions or behaviors that reflect collusion include:

- Trading favors: giving purely to get something in return.
- “You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours” behavior patterns.
- Going along to get along: turning blind eyes to others’ dubious activities, in the expectation they will do the same for you when you need it.
- One hand washing the other: building up a store of tacit, mutual obligations.

People collude when they support and pledge allegiance to an incompetent leader or manager; when they turn a blind eye to the inappropriate behavior of a direct report or co-worker, so they can feel safe with each other, while the unsatisfactory behavior continues.

“If I collude, s/he will appreciate my support and feel seen; and I’ll experience his/her appreciation as a result. That will allow me to feel “OK” in this (dysfunctional) relationship.”

People collude when they share information with a select few and create a clique, with the purpose of being viewed as caring about the others and making them feel special. “When I collude with them, they make me feel in control and secure. In turn, they feel acknowledged that I chose them. We are all being duplicitous and inappropriate in our actions of giving and receiving, but none of us will admit it.”

People collude when they gang up on some hapless individual through bullying, sarcasm, or gossiping — experiencing a false sense of connection and camaraderie with their co-colluders at the expense of the victim.

People collude when they withhold honest and forthright comments about inappropriate behavior in a feedback session for fear of alienating the other or causing themselves trouble. By resisting the truth — and perpetuating the other person’s false belief that

his/her behavior is acceptable — they play the game of mutual acceptance while perpetuating a phony relationship based on false respect.

Why do people collude?

We all experience a sense of deficiency in some way. It's a fact of life. Just about everyone has some lurking fear that we are not good enough or are lacking in some other way. It's part of the human condition. In dealing with this innate sense of deficiency, we come up against these options:

- We can choose to face it and deal with it honestly, ignoring our underlying temptation towards colluding. If we take this line, it requires conscious steps to act authentically and honestly, and sidestep any urge to be a fake and a phony. It means not going along with others who aren't taking the line of sincerity.
- We can collude with other people to ignore, deny, or resist the truth, ignoring "the elephants in the room." If we do that, we have to put on blinders, censor our words, refuse to hear what needs to be heard, trim our actions to convenience, and tell whatever lies are necessary — always hoping that this state of denial will keep the emotional peace, though at the price of perpetuating a co-dependent, dysfunctional relationship.

Collusion hurts

Collusion is lying to protect one another's fragile egos, instead of speaking and acting with integrity and responsibility. It is a drug that leads to progressive levels of dependence. Once they start, colluders need to lie and collude more and more to maintain the false feeling of emotional safety. As a result, they must live in a constant state of vigilance, preoccupied with whether they will be found out and their false facade penetrated. They are constantly concerned that their co-colluder(s) will have a "conversion" and walk away, leaving them alone with the unpleasant and uncomfortable truth of who they really are. They are terrified that, one day, they'll be "outed."

Colluding is exhausting. It requires an inordinate amount of physical, emotional, and psychic energy. It demands continually shoring up relationships that have no foundation beyond mutual convenience. Like all lying, it demands constantly remembering which particular lies you are currently telling — with the additional burden of recalling the other person's lies as well. It is corrosive to head, heart, and soul.

The solution

Meaning, happiness, and true friendship most often appear as the top responses to the research question, "What's really important to you at work?" You can't collude and expect to find real meaning, real happiness and real, authentic friends at work. Acting as if you can itself demands collusion.

The simplest approach to ridding oneself of the need to collude is twofold:

- To seek understanding of the reasons (and excuses) why you refuse to tell your self and others the truth.
- To set your intention on complete honesty, even if it would be easier to take the easy way out of lying.

Telling the truth will set you free: mentally, emotionally, physically, spiritually, and psychologically. Telling the truth allows you to behave authentically and with integrity; to show up in an honest, sincere, and self-responsible way. Telling the truth is the only way to experience a life of real happiness and self-fulfillment; and to experience true relationships with others — to dance through life in lightness and freedom, rather continually tap dancing around all those looming, invisible elephants.

Some questions for self-reflection:

- If you are willing to admit that you collude, what are some of ways you do it?
- Do others collude with you too, by telling you only what they think you need to hear? Why do they do this? Is it for some benefit — or for fear of how you might react?
- Do you find yourself lying and being phony to maintain specific relationships? Why? What are you getting out of it? Is it worth it?
- What keeps you from telling the truth at work? What are you afraid of? What are you trying to hide?
- How do you feel when you are in an experience when you know you are colluding (i.e. giving to get, going along to get along, etc.)?
- What's "right" about colluding? What does colluding get you? Is there another way to get that result without colluding?
- What one baby step can you take right away — this week — to reduce your wish or need to collude?

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