

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

I work in an informal office environment with about six others. We're a tight-knit group and a great team. Quite often, we work through lunch in the conference room and will order a pizza or sandwiches to be delivered. Everyone gets to vote on what we'll order. We split the cost and everyone puts up their money for lunch and a tip when the food comes. But there is one guy, I'll call him "Steve," who never has money. Either he's left his wallet in his cubicle (on another floor) or he only has a \$100 bill and we can't make change. He's always got some reason for why he doesn't chip in. We all just put in a little extra cash and cover the cost of his lunch. This is not a lot of money, and I feel petty for getting ticked off, except that this has been going on for more than two years and everyone is having bad feelings about Steve. Do you have any suggestions as to how I can handle this without making a huge fuss?

-- Tired of footing the bill

Dear Tired,

Stingy Steve should be ashamed of himself for letting the rest of you feed him for the past few years. So, Steve, if you're reading this (and you know who you are): pony up the cash next time you want to dive into a slice of pepperoni and extra cheese at your colleagues' expense. If you are having financial problems and can't afford to buy lunch with your co-workers, bring a sandwich from home and when the order is taken, beg off by saying "None for me thanks, I brought lunch today." If money is not an issue, I urge you to take to heart this advice by Ralph Waldo Emerson: "A man often pays dear for a small frugality." Don't lose the respect and friendship of your colleagues just to save a few bucks on a Reuben. In fact, given that you've been eating free for two years, you might even consider buying lunch for all with a generous, "I've missed paying on few occasions, this one's on me."

Tired, you have a few options here. First, you might speak privately with Steve and tell him that you've noticed that he never chips in for the lunches that you all mutually agree to order. You might ask if he would prefer to bring lunch and not participate in the group nosh. But if he wants to eat the lunch you order rather than bringing something from home, then you expect him to kick in. In a kind and rational way, tell him that you think his failure to contribute is unfair, and that others have noticed this same parsimonious behavior and are not happy with it.

I would put Steve's feet to the fire if this behavior continues. "Oops, I left my wallet in my cubicle again," can be met with, "No problem, we'll wait while you ankle on over to the cube to get your money." "Look at this! I only have a \$100 bill," would be responded to with a pocketful of change for a \$100. "Not a problem, Steve-a-Reno, I can make change." (This one requires that you carry around lots of cash, but it may be worth it, to see his reaction!) You should have a response to every possible contingency (think about the various excuses Steve has made over the past two years and zero in on

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1/12/05

his favorites). In the end, you will show your colleague that there is truth in the aphorism popularized by economist Milton Friedman: “There’s no such thing as a free lunch.” Bon appetit!

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2005 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.