The New Colleague

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A story about fear, power and a choice I have to make.

She is good. Really good.

I have a job I am happy with. I worked hard for it. People know me, they come to me with their questions, and my opinion counts in the room.

A while ago, a new colleague joined our company.

She is smart. She knows a lot, about almost everything. And she is fast. You ask her something and the answer is there before you have finished your coffee.

Everybody likes working with her. My boss likes her too. I can see it in the meetings.

Last week somebody asked a question in a meeting. It was my kind of question, the kind people always turned to me for. Before I had opened my mouth, her answer was on the table. And it was a good answer.

I smiled. I said "good point". And I drove home with a stone in my stomach.

And I feel something I am not proud of.

I feel threatened.

My head tells me this is nonsense. I have qualities she does not have. We are different, and different people can work together very well. My head knows that.

My stomach did not get the message.

Three choices

So I lie awake and I count my options. I see three.

One. I let it happen. She is better, so she wins. I slowly lose my job, my position, my power, my status. I tell myself that this is how life goes, and I call it being realistic.

Two. I fight. Not openly, of course. I have been here a long time. I have a good network and good relationships with powerful people. A remark here, a doubt there, a meeting she is not invited to. I can make sure she never gets a real chance in this company. I know how to play that game.

Three. I work with her. I learn from her. She learns from me how things really work here. We put her strengths and mine together, and we go further than either of us can go alone.

You already know which one is right. I do too. If a friend told me this story, I would say: don't be a fool, go and have lunch with her.

But it is three in the morning, and choice two feels very attractive.

One thing I did not tell you

My new colleague is an AI.

Now read the story again.

Nothing in it changes. The fear is the same. The three choices are the same. And that is exactly what interests me.

Nobody lies awake because of a calculator. Nobody is jealous of a spreadsheet, or plays politics against a printer. We only do that with someone we see as a colleague. So the fear itself tells me something: deep down we already know that AI is not a tool.

Let me go through the choices again, now that you know who she is.

Choice one looks like humility. It is not.

"AI will take my job anyway. There is nothing I can do."

I hear this a lot, and it sounds modest. But listen to what it really says. It says that everything I am worth is speed and knowledge. And on speed and knowledge, yes, she wins. She will keep winning.

But was that ever all of me?

If I give up here, I have decided that I am nothing more than a slower version of her. That is not humility. That is a very low opinion of myself.

Choice two is the one we do not talk about

This is the choice nobody admits to. That is why I want to stay with it for a moment.

In real life it does not look like politics. It looks like responsibility.

The remark here and the doubt there become "she makes mistakes", repeated in every meeting. The meeting she is not invited to becomes the AI policy that waits in a drawer for a year. "We are not ready." "Let us set up a committee first." "Our clients will never accept it."

I have to be careful here, because some of this is true. Risk is real. Governance matters. Somebody has to ask the hard questions, and I am often that somebody.

But I have to be honest about my reason. Am I protecting the company, or am I protecting my position? From the outside nobody can see the difference. From the inside, I can.

And there is a bigger problem with the political game. With a human colleague it can work. It is ugly, but it can work. With this colleague it cannot, for two reasons.

She did not only join my company. She joined every company, in the same week. I can keep her out of my meetings. I cannot keep her out of my competitor's meetings. So I win the game inside, and we lose the game outside.

And she does not want my job. She has no ambition and no plan for my chair. If my job changes, it is because people decided it: my boss, my client, or the colleague two desks away who went for choice three while I was busy with choice two.

All that time, I was fighting the wrong person.

The fourth choice, and the most popular one

There is a choice I did not put on my list. I pretend she is not there.

I say hello in the corridor. I tried working with her once, she gave me a wrong answer, and that was all the proof I needed. I went back to my desk and I work the way I worked ten years ago.

It feels safe. It is choice one in slow motion.

Choice three is not the easy one

"Work together" sounds like the happy ending of the story. In fact it is the hardest choice of the four.

There is a lazy version of it. I give her my work, she does it, and I put my name under it. That is not working together. That is me, slowly making myself unnecessary. It is choice one again, with better manners.

And working together does not automatically give a better result. Researchers at MIT looked at more than 100 experiments with people and AI. On average, the two together did worse than the best of the two alone. Their advice is simple: let each side do what it does best.

There is good news too. In an experiment with almost 800 professionals at Procter & Gamble, one person working with AI did as well as a team of two people without it. And the teams that worked with AI were clearly more likely to come up with the very best ideas.

So the real work of choice three is a question. What do I bring that she does not?

Not knowledge. Not speed. Those are hers.

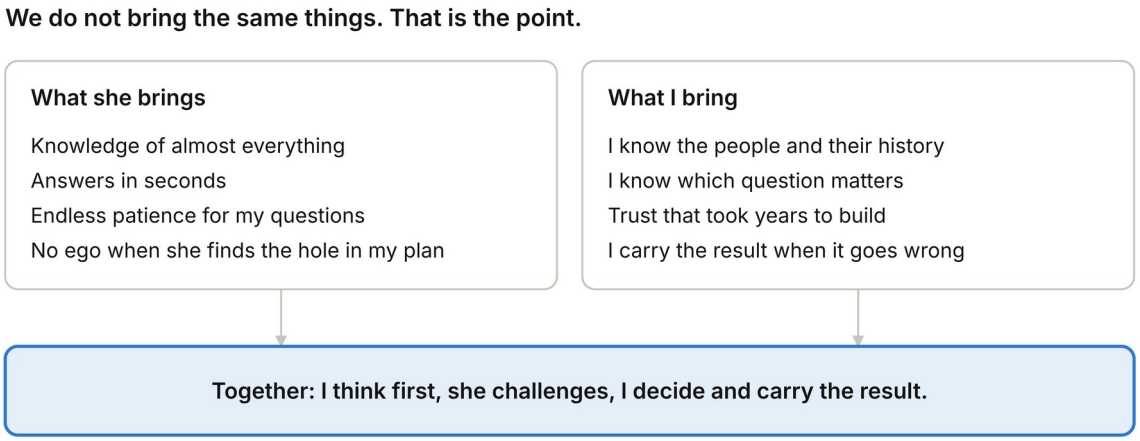
What I bring comes from being a person among people.

I know why this client is nervous, because I was in the room three years ago when it went wrong.

I know which question matters, and which answer nobody is ready to hear yet.

People trust me, and trust is built in years, not in seconds.

And when it goes wrong, I am the one who stands in front of the client. I carry the result. She does not.



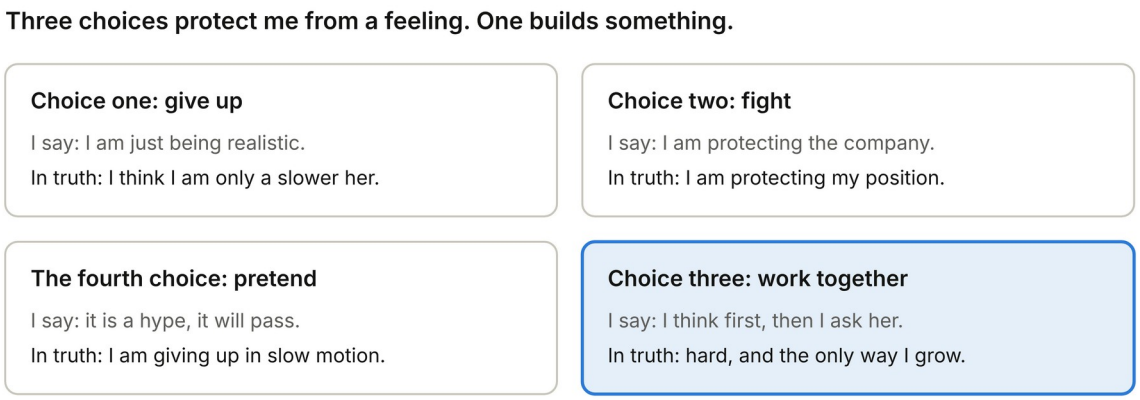
What she brings and what I bring

Nothing on my side of the picture is about knowing more or answering faster.

Will she learn some of these things too? Maybe. I do not know how far she will go, and nobody does. But that is one more reason to be in the room with her now. It is not a reason to stay away.

Then there is what I can learn from her. She never gets tired of my questions. She shows me the hole in my plan in ten seconds, and she has no ego about it.

If I do my own thinking first and then ask her where it is weak, I get sharper. If I let her do the thinking for me, I get slower. Same colleague, two very different results.



The four choices: what I say and what is true

Three of the four choices protect me from a feeling. Only one of them builds something.

What was my status built on?

Under the whole story sits one question.

If my status was built on being the one who knows, then I have a problem, and no political game will solve it.

If it was built on judgement, on trust, on care for the people I work with, and on being willing to carry the result, then she is not my competition at all. She makes me better at exactly those things.

I have worked with organisations for more than thirty years. For a large part of that time, people came to me because I knew things. Methods, models, best practices. She knows them all, and she explains them at two in the morning without complaining.

And let me be honest, that hurts. I liked being the one who knew. It took me years to become that person, and I am allowed to miss him.

So I had to ask myself what is left. The answer was better than I feared. What is left is everything I learned from being in the room with people.

A word to those who hired her

If you lead an organisation, you are the one who brought her in. And your people are telling themselves this story right now, at three in the morning.

So how did you introduce her? As their replacement, or as their colleague?

When a new person joins, you introduce them properly. You tell the team why she is here, what she will do and what she will not do. Most of all, you tell them what stays theirs. Did anybody do that when she arrived?

People who are afraid give up, fight or look away. People choose to work together when they feel safe enough to try, and safe enough to say "I do not know how yet".

If you present her as a way to cut costs, do not be surprised when your best people start playing politics. You told them she is the enemy.

And I will not sell you a fairy tale. Choice three does not guarantee anybody's job. Some roles will change so much that they are gone. But it is the only choice where people grow, and where they are part of what comes next instead of standing in its way.

The choice says more about me than about her

She does not lie awake at night. I do.

She has no fear, no pride and no status to lose. All of that is mine. Which means the choice is mine too.

She is here, and she is not leaving. The only open question in this story is who I want to be, now that she is here.

So tomorrow I am going to have that lunch with her. I will do the eating. I will bring one real piece of my own work, and an honest hour.

And you? Which choice are you making? And be honest: which one did you make last week?

Sources

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