Why being 'too nice' at work can hold you back

"Just be yourself, everyone will like you" are common words of advice for anyone attending an interview or starting a new job.

But while this seems obvious, a desire to be liked can lessen the focus on other things, like gaining respect and making a contribution.

Research for SEEK shows that more than half (54%) of people have been told they are too 'nice' at work, and 58% believe they may have been overlooked for a promotion for being 'too nice'.

Many of us offer to help colleagues even when we don't have time (55%), don't hold colleagues to account when they don't deliver (47%), and take responsibility for others' mistakes (50%) — all for the sake of being nice.

Experts say that striving to be liked can negatively impact our career and diminish how others perceive us and how we perceive ourselves.

So, how do we know if we're being too nice at work and if it's holding us back? And if so, what can we do about it?

How nice is too nice?

The first thing to consider is what nice means to you and how it makes you feel, SEEK's Resident Psychologist Sabina Read explains.

"Some people would interpret nice as being a walkover or boring, someone who's weak or inauthentic. But others who feel well aligned to their likeability may feel it's a reflection of kindness and compassion.

"Consider whether this trait for you represents resentment or whether it represents pride and authenticity," she says.

Jane Jackson, Career Coach and author of Navigating Career Crossroads, says if you're agreeable by nature and you don't feel imposed upon, then there's no problem. But if you feel at any stage you've been taken advantage of, there's a chance you're being too nice.

"It's when you're afraid to speak up in a meeting because you might rock the boat, when you don't want to go against popular opinion, or when you take on work when you don't have time," she says.

"It's when you're letting people put their wants and needs before yours."

Being liked doesn't automatically make you respected, Jackson explains, and this is particularly

the case for managers.

"You need to walk a fine line between being approachable and agreeable and also someone who is able to communicate, take charge and make decisions."

Read says while a desire to be liked is linked to the human need for validation, it can also make us lose sight of our role or expertise in the workplace.

"No one's job description says 'be nice'," she says. "We've lost our way if being likeable has become our primary driver."

How being seen as too nice can negatively affect you

If you are too nice to the point where you always let others put their needs first, and you find it hard to be assertive at work, you can experience the following problems:

- people take advantage of you
- you end up overloaded with work or involved in irrelevant projects
- colleagues and managers take credit for your work
- you find it hard to make decisions that involve hard conversations
- you may be overlooked for promotion because you're unable to promote yourself
- you're unable to take charge as a leader
- you can't manage people efficiently because you're unable to provide constructive feedback or hold people to account when they don't deliver
- people will see you as someone who doesn't speak up or challenge the status quo, which fosters a lack of respect
- you don't offer your best to your company.

Being too agreeable can, ultimately, be "a downward spiral", Read says.

"People respond to us accordingly. They may not come to us as much or question our voice and then the respect dissolves. Then we lose expertise and we lose confidence."

How to move towards asserting yourself and changing perceptions

There are various ways to improve your assertiveness and confidence, plus the way you're perceived at work:

1.

Find a role model: Read suggests we think about someone we have respected in a workplace and consider their qualities. "Sometimes when we shine a light on another we have clarity. Once we identify the qualities that matter to us most, we can think about how to enhance them."

2. **Consider when you're at your best:** Think about the times when you've thrived in the workplace, Read suggests. "It'll probably be when you've been confident and made an impact."

3. **Learn how to be assertive:** This means setting boundaries and knowing how to say no in the right way, Jackson says. "If someone asks you to do some work and it's too much, you can say that while you'd love to help, you have other priorities right now. If you're able to assert yourself, people will realise you're not afraid to push back when necessary."

4. **Value your skills and learn how to promote yourself:** To understand the value you're bringing to an organisation, Jackson suggests creating a 'brag book' for yourself – which is simply writing down each week something you did that made a difference at work. Perhaps you noticed a wasteful procedure, saved time, saved money or streamlined a process. "Write down what the challenges were and how your action helped," she says.

   You don't have to show this to anyone – it may just bring you a personal confidence boost. But it could also give you useful points to share next time you need to pitch yourself for a project, or ask for a raise.

   Standing up for yourself also means asking to go to a conference, doing a course or speaking at a meeting — things that will further your career or grow your personal brand.

5. **Face your fears:** For people who think they're too nice and are feeling resentful yet unable to speak up, Jackson suggests they analyse what they're afraid of. "It could be a matter of self-confidence, a lack of self-belief, a fear of confrontation or fear of conflict," she says. And then it's a question of pondering what is the worst thing that could happen.

Once we have a better understanding of our strengths and what may be holding us back, we can feel more confident about the contribution we make, Jackson says.

To help you focus on the person you want to be at work, she suggests swapping 'nice' for stronger words such as 'professional', 'kind' or 'fair'.

If we're being true to ourselves, she says, we have nothing to fear. "Just because someone disagrees with you, doesn't mean that you're wrong, and it doesn't mean that you're not nice," says Jackson.

"If you know what your values are and you speak up according to what drives you and what you feel is important, then you can't really go wrong."

Source: Independent research conducted by Nature on behalf of SEEK, interviewing 4,000 Kiwis annually. Published April 2022.