

Got an 800-pound gorilla? It might be time to confront him

April 14, 2014 - by: [Dan Oswald](#) 0 COMMENTS

by Dan Oswald

One of the national hotel chains, in an attempt to attract business travelers, advertises that if you stay at its hotels, you'll be able to take on "the 800-pound gorilla in the room." The ad shows Regional Manager Amy, after spending a night in one of the hotels, being able to tame the chest-pounding 800-pound gorilla the next day in her meeting.

This is a clever play on an old joke: "Where does an 800-pound gorilla sleep? Anywhere it wants." That's because the 800-pound gorilla is the force you can't stop or fight. It's too big. It's too powerful. It's too aggressive. As a result, the gorilla can do anything it wants.

We all know that 800-pound gorilla at work. The guy who says and does whatever he wants in a meeting. The one who believes he's better or more important than everyone else in the room. The one who throws his weight around—he's 800 pounds, so why not?

So is it true that the 800-pound gorilla can't be stopped or even fought? It's not true for Regional Manager Amy, our heroine in the commercial, and it's not true for you, either. There are ways to deal with an 800-pound gorilla if you're brave enough to try.

Like any bully, sometimes all it takes to tame the 800-pound gorilla is to confront him. The gorilla likes to throw his weight around, but when someone pushes back, he's surprised and doesn't always know how to respond. Lie down and take the abuse, and the gorilla only becomes more aggressive. Stand up and poke him back, and suddenly he's on his heels.

If you don't report to the gorilla, there's less risk in pushing back—hard. If the gorilla doesn't control your fate at the company, my suggestion is to respond to him wherever he's acting out. Let's say you're in a meeting, and our outsized hairy friend is acting inappropriately. He has decided to beat his chest and exert his dominance at the expense of someone else in the room. Maybe it's you, or maybe it's someone else. It doesn't matter. This is your chance to stand up and point out that he's acting like an oversized chimp. You don't think you'll be a hero to everyone else in the room? Some might actually jump out of their chairs and cheer.

You don't have to be nasty. You don't have to stoop to his level. But pointing out his behavior in front of those to which he's exhibiting it sends a loud message. You see, the gorilla likes to demonstrate his dominance. When someone responds by cowering in the corner or just ignoring the behavior, his actions are reinforced. He feels powerful and unchecked. But calling him on his actions in front of others sends a loud message.

I'm usually a huge proponent of settling these things behind closed doors, but the gorilla must be tamed in his habitat. In my experience, if you talk to him privately, you're met with denials and lack of self-awareness. But if you hit him back in front of others, it hurts. He feels the full brunt of the force he's been wielding, which in part is embarrassment and humiliation. The gorilla wants others to feel smaller than he is. You stand up to him in front of the others he's trying to impress or dominate, and you reduce him to the size of a small chimpanzee.

What if the gorilla is your boss or another senior executive? There are still ways to deal with him. You might need to enlist the help of others. It's no small task to take down an 800-pound gorilla, so you shouldn't be afraid to ask for help. You might enlist the help of a peer of the gorilla—someone not in a position to be harmed by his reaction to being called out. Or you get some help from HR.

Or maybe you go to the gorilla with a warning. You talk to him behind closed doors about what you are seeing in his behavior. You relate how his actions are perceived, and you tell him that the next time he acts this way, you will speak out. This does a few things. First, it lets the gorilla know how others see him. Second, it gives him a warning that his actions won't go unchecked. And third, it provides you with some cover should you be questioned about your handling of the situation. You can say that you tried to settle this privately but that it was ineffective.

In the end, if someone is acting like an 800-pound gorilla, it's not going to be a secret. And if you take him on, it's hard for any organization not to support you, regardless of his position—unless he's the owner or CEO. And if you're working for a company where the top executive is throwing his weight around at the expense of those around you, I suggest you find somewhere else to work.

So, next time you're in a meeting with the 800-pound gorilla and he starts acting like one, let him know it. Plan it out. Know what you're going to say. Because I guarantee you will have the element of surprise on your side. The 800-pound gorilla isn't used to being confronted. Usually when he beats his chest, people run and hide. He won't know what to do when you stand your ground.