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# How To Deal With Favoritism At Work



**Jacquelyn Smith** Forbes Staff  
*If it has to do with leadership, jobs, or careers, I'm on it.*



## Gallery: 9 Things You Can Do When You're The Victim of Favoritism at Work

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Do you have a colleague who is subject to special treatment while everyone else gets pushed aside? Are you the one praised incessantly by the boss, or the go-to person for all the great projects? It's no secret that the playing field among workers isn't level in most workplaces—and chances are you've been on one end of blatant favoritism at some point in your career.

It turns out that this widespread practice of favoritism can have a significant impact, whether you're the victim or the VIP. A survey conducted by [Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business](#) found that 92% of senior business executives have seen favoritism at play in employee promotions, including at their own companies (84%). About a quarter of the polled execs admitted to practicing favoritism themselves.

“Favoritism is absolutely seen in most offices, big or small,” says Ryan Kahn, a career coach, founder of [The Hired Group](#), star of MTV's *Hired*, and author of *Hired! The Guide for the Recent Grad*. “People enjoy working with friends, which often inadvertently turns into favoritism. It can start as something as simple as being included on a lunch outing where business is discussed and may lead to something much more substantial, like getting salary and promotional benefits. Wanting to work with people you like is fine, as long as it is fair to other employees.”

Lynn Taylor, a national workplace expert and author of [Tame Your Terrible Office Tyrant; How to Manage Childish Boss Behavior and Thrive in Your Job](#), agrees. She says favoritism in the workplace is as common as the office water cooler, but a lot more toxic. “It's like the old familiar teacher's pet syndrome from grade school,” she says. “One or more employees are chosen to handle the better, more senior, higher visibility projects—making others who are equally or more

qualified feel as if the boss is not playing fair. Favoritism can be fairly benign in some situations, but it can also be much more serious and develop into a hostile environment for others.”

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Favoritism is human nature, says Mark Payleitner, a business career program instructor at [Computer Systems Institute](#). “We start out with a favorite toy and grow from there,” he adds. “When a boss assigns a critical, high-profile project to one individual, she hopefully selects the best person for the job. But when she gives a friend the office with the best view based on no other criteria, that crosses into favoritism.”

Teri Hockett, the chief executive of [What’s For Work?](#), a career site for women, concurs. She says it’s healthy for management to favor and reward an employee who is always willing to collaborate and offer up real solutions. “This can even motivate employees to deliver better results,” she says. But when the boss favors someone in the office without real merit, there may be serious consequences.

“It’s important for employees to distinguish favoritism from performance recognition,” Kahn says. “With my own clients, I’ve had instances where they’ve seen peers getting opportunities they were not receiving and perceiving that as favoritism. On further investigation, it turned out those employees were working extra hours, going above and beyond to earn the confidence of their employer and, ultimately, earning those chances for advancement. My clients were then able to follow their lead, but in the extra effort and secure the same opportunities.”

*How can unhealthy favoritism impact the workplace?*

Beyond potential legal implications, there are many negative consequences, Kahn says. “By not treating everyone equally, a manager is fostering a sense of resentment and separation that can de-motivate employees and damage team

unity,” he says. “Also, by focusing attention on particular employees, it’s easy to overlook growth opportunities and unique skill sets offered by others.”

Hockett adds that by not giving other team members an opportunity to shine, the boss is not allowing the team or company to grow, which can cost the company more money in the long run. “There’s also a chance that the employer may lose good people, if they feel their talents are going unnoticed,” she adds.

Payleitner says unearned favoritism also “leads to the unselected believing that your efforts will not be recognized fairly; that the yardstick for success has nothing to do with performance.”

### **In Pictures: 9 Things You Can Do When You’re The Victim of Favoritism at Work**

So, if you suspect you are the one being favored unfairly, “taking on the role of an inclusive team member can be an asset,” says Marsha Egan, a workplace and e-mail productivity coach, CEO of [InboxDetox.com](http://InboxDetox.com) and author of *Inbox Detox and the Habit of E-mail Excellence* (Acanthus 2009). “Suggesting the names of other capable candidates for opportunities, and sharing positive comments about team members’ performance, and other inclusive behaviors can be useful. To jealously guard being favored may help you with your boss, but it will not help you with your associates.”

*What else can you do if you’re the favored employee?*

**Speak up.** Have a conversation with your boss or with HR to figure out how to correct the situation, Kahn says. “Ultimately, there is no upside to favoritism. If you’re being singled out as a favorite and advancing purely because of that, you’re going to end up in a position you’re not qualified for surrounded by resentful and unsupportive peers.” If you’re earning the opportunities you’re receiving, but others are perceiving it as a favoritism, they may just be undermining your hard work.

**Be able to say no.** “If you feel uncomfortable with the direction of the relationship, act sooner versus later,” Taylor says. Say something like, “I have so

much work on my plate; what do you think of my sharing this project with James? I think he's got some time on his hands that would make this stronger, and we could be a good team." "By sharing some of the work and glory, you'll make your work life a lot more palatable overall," she adds.

**Whenever possible, share the lime-light**, Payleitner says. This is true of almost any professional situation, but critical when others may feel the attention is undeserved.

**Keep it professional**, Taylor says. You're not at work to amuse or befriend your boss, and feeding into any over-the-top friendship will make it difficult for you to get cooperation from the people you most need it from: your peers. "You don't want to be ostracized by your team any more than they want to be ostracized by the boss, or you'll ultimately fail," she says. "As in a sports team environment, you will need each other to succeed. If you don't have their cooperation or trust, your success will be short-lived."

**Remain trustworthy**, Payleitner says. "Trust is the first casualty of favoritism. If you feel you are the beneficiary of a favored status, you need to make sure you never offer a reason to doubt your sincerity and trustworthiness."

**Don't accept the benefits of favoritism.** While it is difficult to refuse the best office, the choice assignments, or the newest desk chair—it is important that you understand why you are selected, Payleitner says. "A 'Wow – what did I do to deserve this?' may be enough to make sure your boss gets things back on an even playing field."

*Here are 9 ways to navigate through workplace favoritism when you're the victim:*

**Figure out if you're really a victim.** "If you feel that you are the overlooked employee, first of all have a good conversation with yourself to make sure that you are not unnecessarily playing victim," Egan says. "If the person being favored does truly perform better than you do, it is time to ramp up your performance to being equal or better than the performance of those you feel are being favored."

**Speak up.** Do so diplomatically, Taylor says. “Don’t ambush your boss, no matter how long your tenure or relationship. Think it through, and script it to yourself privately first if need be.” You want to be clear, calm and concise.

Egan agrees. “You need to be judicious about confronting the favoring boss with your suspicions,” she says. “To accuse, or mention that others in the office are feeling that the boss is playing favorites with that one person, only makes you the rat, and creates defensiveness by the boss. It can really backfire. It is better to not discuss the favoritism, but to ask for opportunities, and offer to help, instead.”

**Continue working hard.** Be professional and do your part to show you care about the team, company, and clients, Hockett says. “Never allow unhealthy favoritism to affect the professional you are.”

**Try to understand the reason for the special attention.** Is it a friendship or other relationship? Is it because of a history or common experience together? Is it simply a matter of habit or trust? Knowing this may help you determine whether it is fair or unfair favoritism, Payleitner says.

**Don’t be angry with the favored employee.** It’s usually not the employee’s fault that he or she receives special treatment—so don’t blame them or treat them poorly. As difficult as it might be, maintain a normal professional relationship with the favored worker.

**Stay positive.** In any situation where you suspect favoritism, remain positive and proactive. Allowing it to affect your performance or morale only creates a downward spiral, Egan says. “Talking about it with co-workers only makes you look bad, even though it may feel good at the time you’re doing it.”

**Be patient.** If the favorite is truly undeserving, be patient; the boss will eventually realize that it is in their own best interest to look around for a new go-to person, Payleitner says. “Make sure you’re on top of your game when that time comes.”

**Call upon Human Resources.** You never want to be a tattletale, but if you’ve tried everything else and nothing changes, then reach out to Human Resources to

see what options are available, Hockett says.

**Always keep the conversations going.** “If favoritism is severe and you’re being ignored, you will have to be more aggressive in your communications,” Hockett says. “You may have to meet more regularly, and ask your boss if there are issues regarding your perceived ability to take on new assignments. You may have to talk to others in the department if the situation is egregious; there’s power in numbers. If so, you might consider telling your boss that many in the department would like more face time with him or her, and suggest more department lunches, for example.”

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