

Stephen Says



Dear Stephen,

FROM: Working for a Greedy Boss, Anytown, USA

I am an interior designer in a small architectural and interiors firm in NYC that employs about 30 people. I'll jump right into the issue: the owner of our design firm is very close to a dealer who gets most of our clients work. After two years here, I now realize that no matter what furniture products and brands we specify for a client's project, my boss, suggests that we substitute a similar looking product, but always the same brand, one kind of desk made in China. No matter who our client is, almost always, the same dealer and manufactures get the job, even when it's bid. It's an open secret that the owner of our firm is in the pocket of the dealer who refers a large percentage of projects to us. Rumor has it this dealer is pulling the strings with certain manufactures to get steeper discounts and increase their profit margins--while continuing to look competitive. I would like to believe it is not true, but we designers will specify a certain product and brand, and the dealer will, time and again, convince my boss to substitute in a similar brand, where the dealer gets a bigger discount. The whole game has become so obvious to those of us who specify the products and the interiors. This would all be fine if the discount were passed on to our clients, but the dealer just pockets the extra cash and supplies a lesser product for close to the price of a premium product. I don't even think the clients or their owners' reps know. Hey, maybe the extra cash also helps keep the lights on here where I work. I am not sure. Either way, I feel dirty and unethical. I know our clients do not see what's going on, and I think the substitutes that we're making often compromise my designs. There really is a difference in products. So here I am now. I know that the owner of our firm is going to push this one client to this one dealer, the dealer likes these certain furniture lines where they get more than 50/10 discount, and we know where that extra discount goes. What should I do?

Stephen:

You know, this sort of activity is said to happen in the Olympics and other sports leagues, in government and on Wall St., in the music industry and in Hollywood. Every time you turn around someone has their hand out. As the saying goes, if you're not cheating, you're not trying, and cheating is usually very profitable until you get caught. Ultimately, this sort of palm-greasing is small potatoes in a world where multibillion dollar security deals are given to friends of the Vice President of the United States. That said, cheating is cheating. I feel, though, that I should caution you against making certain accusations that are guaranteed to get you black-listed in the industry--blowing the whistle is a heavy burden. As the son of a lawyer, I can tell you what my Dad would say: There are two sides to every story. I have worked for a dealer and a manufacture and I am not going to pass judgment because I have never seen a smidgen of anything illegal in the circles in which I travel. And yet! If what you're saying is, in fact, true (and bottom line is that in these sorts of situations, I tend to believe that where there is this much smoke there is usually fire), that is black-and-white wrong, and your clients have a right to know. Either way, I just have one word for you: Quit. Any way you cut it, this is the first, best option you have. You obviously are unhappy, and if you think something unethical is going on between your boss and a dealer: right or wrong, true or false, go find another job. It's the perfect time--both for you and the market. The job market is red hot, and you should be able to easily find another job, and not be distracted by something that is bothering you. I love this crazy industry and want to believe that everyone in every part of our business is honest and upstanding, yet I realize people are only human and make mistakes, especially when they are fighting to make their businesses work. One way or another, go find another job; this doesn't seem like a situation you want anything to do with. Leave before you get burned.

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You can send your workplace questions to Stephen at:

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Questions selected to be answered, will appear in this column. Please use the Subject: Stephen Says for all emails. Stephen Viscusi is a bestselling author, television personality, and CEO of The Viscusi Group, global executive recruiters located in New York. Follow Stephen on Twitter @WorkplaceGuru, Like Stephen on Facebook; and follow him on LinkedIn.