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VIEW FROM THE CUBE

Swiping colleagues' supplies can lead to borrowing trouble

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It's the 11th hour, you're on your fourth pot of coffee, the client's report is due tomorrow, and FedEx arrives in 10 minutes to pick it up.

You're proofreading, checking numbers, typing vigorously, and with only a few minutes to go you pound the "PRINT" button in a glorious finale.

But what's this? It's not over yet. Your stapler is missing. Geez! Someone has stolen your stapler!

Your next move is the defining moment. Are you going to: A) Rummage through the office hunting for your stapler; or B) Grab a stapler from the desk nearest to you? With only seconds to spare, most folks will go with option B.

This is typical office behavior, and not altogether bad. In a perfect world, everything will be where we want it, when we need it. Of course, it's not a perfect world. And when you're under stress, rushing to get that \$6 million proposal out the door, borrowing someone's hole puncher doesn't seem like such a big deal.

You're right, it's not a big deal — unless the item fails to get returned.

A survey released by MJN Consulting, a management and organization think-tank, included "not returning borrowed office supplies" on the list of "Top 10 Things That Drive Co-Workers Crazy."

It's annoying, it's uncivil, and it flies in the face of simple common courtesy.

It's embarrassing to get frustrated over something that appears so petty. But you're not alone. Bring up this topic by the office watercooler, and you'll hear passionate pleas for an end to supply borrowing. It's these small things, which nobody talks about, that build up into a potential explosion.

A seemingly harmless swipe can seriously upset a person, sparking a moment of intense anger, or "desk rage," as it's becoming known. Marjorie Brody, an authority on business behavior, noted in a recent article that 34 percent of people blamed rude co-workers as a contributing factor of job stress.

This incivility can create a domino effect. It starts when the next guy — the one whose stapler you took — returns to his desk, rolls his eyes, and out of sheer dis-



ILLUSTRATION/ANTHONY SCHULTZ

content takes someone else's stapler just so that there's one at his desk. And so it goes around the office: I take your stuff, you take her stuff, she takes his stuff, and so on. Before long, you've got an office full of bandits.

At this point it's no longer borrowing. It's bordering on stealing, or what some people refer to as "reciprocal theft."

Jeffrey Seglin, writer of a monthly business ethics column for the Sunday New York Times, said, "Reciprocal theft is different and can be more odious [than stealing]. It starts out innocently enough but quickly escalates until someone gets angry. And before you know it, you've got

a full-out office supplies war."

Reciprocal theft in the office seems harmless at first. "Someone took mine, so I took someone else's. What's the big deal?" This sounds like a justifiable defense. There is something so guiltless about taking an item we perceive to have little or no value. After all, the pens and Post-Its are given to us for free, and even so, we know that this stuff is worth only a few bucks. It would be different if someone stole your CD player or the gilded framed photo of your daughter.

If you work in an office where the supply closet is open to everyone, then it seems fair to assume that all supplies are

community property. The problem becomes not so much about co-workers taking your stuff as it does about them invading your space.

Seglin, who wrote the book "The Good, The Bad, and Your Business," suggests that it's different, though, if you work in a company where supplies are assigned to you.

"The real question is 'Should people show some respect for their colleagues by displaying some basic courtesy, such as leaving a note when they borrow something?' And the answer is yes. Even if it's understood that everyone borrows from everyone else, would it kill you to leave a

note?" he said.

Scott Adams, creator of the Dilbert cartoon, jokes about inter-office borrowing. "In one of my past jobs, theft was the only way to get office supplies," said Adams. "The approved method was to ask the department secretary to place an order. But she was on the phone making personal calls from 1986 to 1995 without ever taking a break to work, so 'borrowing' was far more practical."

One of my co-workers shared a secret with me. She places tiny blue stickers on the bottom of all her supplies. They're not meant to prevent her stuff from being taken, but to quickly identify the stuff — and the thief — when it's missing. This, to me, seems like a frustrating office hobby.

If on-the-job detective work isn't your cup of tea, there are other ways to deal with this. There is a proper way to go about using someone else's supplies.

"You ask first, then borrow when it is convenient to the owner of whatever it is you wish, and then you return it in perfect shape at the previously agreed upon time." So says Letitia Baldrige, the doyenne of executive etiquette and the author of 14 books on manners.

There is nothing wrong with using someone else's office supplies, provided that it doesn't get out of hand. But, Baldrige said, "if you've been working like a dog on a deadline all day, and you need your stapler at a certain moment, and it's not there, you have every right to implode."

But if co-workers are in a fury over items disappearing from their desks, then it might be time to bring in the big guns. Informal mediation with an employer is not uncalled for. It might even be necessary to write a borrowing policy into the office personnel manual.

Scott Adams offers another idea.

"New computers often come equipped with video cameras. Soon it will be possible to have your cubicle monitored when you're not there. Motion detectors will activate the camera and leave a record of every office supply theft." At least that, said Adams, "will be fun."

David Whitemyer wrote this with his own pen, his own paper, and his own computer. He lives in Boston.