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Dealing with Difficult Coworkers

You spend more time with coworkers each week than you do with your family — especially if you work in an open-plan office. When you must interact with a colleague whose behaviors annoy you, your workday can quickly become stressful and unproductive. You may even begin to consider switching jobs so that you can work more sanely elsewhere.

Difficult coworkers can range from the mildly annoying — for instance, someone who talks too loudly on the phone — to those whose pushy, power-hungry, or bullying behaviors make you dread going to work each day.

When Ray Henson, an organization and management consultant and licensed psychologist (Henson Consulting International, Somerset, NJ), coaches individuals who come to him because of problem associates, he advises them to diagnose the situation first. “Don’t immediately put all the blame on the other worker. Step back and notice if there are hot buttons that they are triggering in you,” he says. “For example, if it bugs you when that person is chronically late to meetings, examine why that behavior bothers you.”

Try to put yourself in that person’s place, Henson adds. What could be causing them to behave the way they do? Have they suffered a personal loss or perhaps are under tremendous pressure on a different project? In addition, looking at whether your interactions with that person are the same, similar to, or different from what others on your work team experience can help you sort out whether the issue is really with you or the other person.

“When you seek to understand how both of you are contributing to the situation, you’ll be in a better position to negotiate a resolution so that you can work together more effectively,” adds Lisa Silvershein, a certified behavioral coach at Ark Career Coaching, in New York, NY.

Possibly the worst thing to do, both Henson and Silvershein agree, is to let the situation fester. Others are observing your interactions with that person, so consider talking to a trusted colleague in confidence. Ask them for advice in a positive spirit so that you come across as wanting to improve the situation. Do not trash-talk or gossip about the other person to your colleague. This only makes *you* look bad, says Silvershein.

Maintain a positive attitude when you approach your troublesome counterpart. “Respond with class,” says Henson. “Ask for a private discussion with your coworker; maybe grab a cup of coffee in the cafeteria or offsite. They are probably feeling negative vibes from you each day and will likely welcome an opportunity to have a conversation. Go into the discussion assuming that they will want to work

things out.” If you are uncomfortable or do not know how to have this type of difficult conversation, an executive coach or trusted advisor can help you choose your words and role-play the discussion beforehand.

When you sit down to talk, treat the other person with respect; don’t accuse or bait them. “Convey your perception of the situation. People are less defensive when you make it about you and not about their behavior,” says Silvershein. For instance, you can say, “Something is not working for me and I need you to help me with it. Here’s what I see ...”

Go to the conversation prepared with examples of the difficult behavior, and then listen to what the other person has to say, so that together you can negotiate a resolution. For instance, if your perception is that the other person talks too loudly on the phone, the solution might be for you to wear earplugs at your desk and for them to take long or personal calls in a conference room.

Document your conversation with a follow-up email to your coworker. This email can help you both stay on track with the agreed-upon solution. This record can also come in handy if you need to gain the advice or support of your management.

If, despite your intention to have a positive conversation, your coworker gets angry or defensive, be prepared to postpone your talk, so that you do not say something that you will regret later. Silvershein advises saying, “Clearly we’re not connecting on this, so let’s talk about it tomorrow when we’re calmer.”

When a coworker resists your attempts to find a compromise, brief your manager on the situation and get them involved in finding a solution. “If the boss has conversations with this employee and doesn’t make progress either, then they can take the next steps,” says Henson. This could include setting up a performance improvement plan for the individual or reassigning them to a different department. If your company uses 360 feedback — in which employees receive confidential, anonymous feedback from the people who work around them — it might be helpful to have everyone in the work group participate so that the team dynamic gets considered, he adds.

Henson emphasizes that you want to come across as being the one who is proactive about removing roadblocks to team performance and helping the group work more effectively. In addition, Silvershein points out, “You don’t ever want to be seen as the person who can’t work with people. If you want to advance your career, you need to be seen as someone with thick enough skin to deal with troublesome coworkers.”

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