

HUMAN CAPITAL

When the People Are the Problem

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At one time or another you may recall saying to yourself, "If it weren't for some of the people around here, I wouldn't have many problems at all."

Workplace conflict often stems from misunderstanding, personality differences, and differing opinions. Some conflict is good — divergent points of view can stimulate creativity, for example.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to the bottom line that we find ways to more effectively deal with difficult relationships at work. The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) puts the average cost to replace an employee at approximately 30 percent of their income, and 75 percent of HR professionals report that staff retention would increase 10 percent with better conflict resolution between supervisors and coworkers.

A similar study reports that nearly 20 percent of a manager's time is spent resolving employee conflicts. Managers and team leaders agree that the downside risks of intervening, such as acting on hearsay or assumptions, taking sides, eroding productive time, and creating dependence on them to resolve others' differences, can lead to bigger problems.

Instead, more effective leaders coach employees on how to resolve their own differences, thereby building a culture in which conflict resolution is seen as everyone's responsibility. To get the job done with and through others, we need to interact more effectively with people who behave badly, or in a way that annoys us.

Here are three key tips for dealing with difficult people at work:

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The most important tip is to recognize our own reactions and question our assumptions about the other person's intent. This can prevent emotions from blinding us to a constructive, rational approach.

- Stop angry, or otherwise negative, self-talk that can lead to behavior we regret — don't take it personal or interpret the issue as a personal criticism.
- Oxygenate the brain, which we need to think rationally, by taking a deep breath.
- Substitute constructive self-talk that encourages you to try to understand the other person's perspective and/or reason(s) for the behavior that annoys you.
- FOCUS on your mutual goals and possible differences in your relating styles.
- What you want (and don't want) from the relationship and the interaction:

- What business goals or outcomes do you want or need?
- What personal impression do you want others to have of you?
- What do you think the other person wants or needs?
- And what don't you want to happen — e.g. raise the emotion level, allow it to continue, insult people, etc.

The other person's relating style

Try to understand the other person's valued relating style. There are many tools to help us understand others — their similarities to our own style, and those differences that can cause static in a relationship. Tools like the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), Strength Deployment Inventory (SDI), and DISC are especially helpful to provide insight about team members' similarities, differences, and even blind spots. For example, someone whose behavior is outspoken and confident in directing others may be perceived as arrogant, threatening, and possibly manipulative by an associate whose behavior is more reserved and self-reliant.

Change the dynamic

Rather than fight or flee, try talking it out to change the interaction dynamic — and perhaps the future dynamics of the relationship.

Find a private place to talk it out. Privacy helps to reduce or diffuse tension, and break down defensiveness sooner — neither party has their self-worth to protect in front of an outside audience.

Stay focused on the issue. Avoid starting the discussion by implying blame on the other party — finger-pointing and accusations escalate defensiveness. For example, "I need to talk with you about the importance of keeping to our budgeted hours" puts focus on the issue, as opposed to an accusation: "You waste so much time during regular hours that you need to work overtime. You're destroying our budget!"

Ask questions to test your assumptions about the situation so the other person can shed light on it from his or her perspective, then share yours.

Try to collaborate on the issues most important to you both, and reach agreement on what each of you can do to work together more constructively and overcome your differences.

Learning how to deal more effectively with difficult people benefits the business, can leave all parties with a sense of accomplishment or feeling of satisfaction, reduce stress, and can even be a boost for your career. It is a highly desirable competency, especially in a team culture.

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