

How to Navigate Conflict at Work

Seven Strategies to Make Progress with Even the Most Difficult People

Interpersonal conflicts—with insecure bosses, know-it-all colleagues, and passive-aggressive peers—are common at work. And it's easy to get caught up in them. In one study, 94% of respondents said they had worked with a “toxic” person in the previous five years. Another survey of 2,000 U.S. workers indicated that their top source of tension on the job was relationships.

Trapped in these negative dynamics we find it hard to be our best selves or to improve the situation. Instead, we spend time worrying, react in regrettable ways that violate our values, avoid difficult colleagues, and sometimes even withdraw from work entirely. But those responses lead to a host of bad outcomes, including reduced creativity, slower and worse decision-making, and big mistakes.

So how can we be our best selves? Here are seven strategies that will help you work more effectively with difficult colleagues. These are not silver bullets, but they should make your interactions more tolerable if not more positive.

Remember that your perspective is just one of many. We all come to the workplace with different viewpoints and values. When disagreements arise, however, most of us believe that we're seeing the issue objectively and correctly, and anyone who has another view is uninformed, irrational, or biased. Social psychologists refer to this tendency as *naïve*

realism. Once we're confident about something, we find it hard to imagine that others won't see it the same way.

It's important to recognize and resist this gut reaction. Challenge your own perspective by asking questions such as:

- *How do I know what I believe is true?*
- *What if I'm wrong?*
- *What assumptions have I made?*
- *How would someone with different values and experiences see things?*

The answers to these questions are a good way of reminding yourself that your view is just that—*your view*. Not everyone sees things the same way, and that's okay.

Be aware of your biases. Biases creep into all sorts of workplace interactions. We use mental shortcuts that frequently result in misjudgments about other people and their attitudes or motivations. How can we interrupt these biases? When you're struggling with a coworker, ask yourself:

- *What role could my biases be playing here?*
- *Is it possible I'm not seeing the situation clearly because I'm making assumptions about this person?*
- *Am I unwilling to rethink my initial impression?*



Play devil's advocate and question your own interpretation of the situation. Finally, ask someone you trust—and who will tell you the truth—to help you reflect on the ways in which you might be seeing the situation unfairly.

Don't make it "me against them." In a disagreement it's easy to think in polarizing ways: "me versus you," enemies at war. One person is being difficult; the other isn't. One person is right; the other is wrong.

To break out of this mental model, instead imagine that there are not two but three entities in the situation—you, your colleague, and the dynamic between you. Maybe the third entity is something specific like a decision you must make together or an assignment you need to complete. Rather than work to change your colleague, try to make progress on that third thing. In this way, you reframe problematic coworkers as colleagues with whom you share a problem to be solved.

Know your goal. To avoid drama and stay focused on the work, you need to be clear about your goals. Make a list of your goals (big and small) and then circle the most important ones. Your intentions will determine how you act. Once you've decided what you want to accomplish, write it down on a piece of paper. People who vividly describe or picture their goals are more likely to achieve them. Refer to your goals before interacting with your colleagues to keep your eyes on the prize.

Avoid workplace venting and gossip—Mostly. It is perfectly legitimate to seek help with sorting out your feelings or to check with someone else that you're seeing things clearly. But choose whom you talk to (and what you share) carefully. Look for people who are constructive, have your best interest at heart, will challenge your perspective when they disagree, and can be discreet.

Experiment to find what works. There isn't one right way to get a know-it-all to stop being condescending or your passive-aggressive colleague to deal with you in a more straightforward way. Start by coming up with two or three methods you want to test out. Often small actions can have a big impact. Then design an experiment: Determine what you'll do differently, pick a period of time to try it out, and see how it works. For example, if you want to improve communication with a difficult colleague, you might decide that for two weeks you're going to ignore that person's tone and focus on the underlying message. Keep trying, tweaking, and refreshing experiments or abandoning ones that don't produce results. Each experiment will teach you something.

Be—and stay—curious. When dealing with a negative coworker, it's easy to become resigned and pessimistic, thinking things will never change. But this will get you nowhere. Instead, adopt a curious mindset and maintain hope that your troubled relationship can be improved. Research shows that curiosity brings a host of benefits, including warding off bias, preventing stereotyping, and avoiding unhelpful aggression or defensiveness. The key is to shift from drawing often unflattering conclusions to posing genuine questions. Rather than automatically judging your difficult colleague, ask yourself, *What's going on with him? Why is he acting this way?*

Source: Gallo, A. (SEP-OCT 2022). How to navigate conflict with a coworker. *Harvard Business Review*.

