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How to Deal with Difficult Co-Workers

We've all had a co-worker who's driven us nuts – a micromanaging boss, a suckup colleague, a slacker employee. You might think your professional life would improve dramatically if they weren't around.

But, says [Diana McLain Smith](#), author of [The Elephant in the Room: How Relationships Make or Break the Success of Leaders and Organizations](#), they could actually be your ticket to dramatic

professional growth. "Anytime you find yourself up against somebody who frustrates you, that person is telling you that you're at the limits of your competence," she says. "That's why you're frustrated – because you don't know how to deal with them. You need to make a conscious choice: do you need to learn how to deal with that person in order to be successful?"

Interpersonal relationships often get short shrift in the workplace, says McLain Smith, because "we think of business as the rational arena, where it's about analytics and the substance of the work – and of course it is. But very quickly, relationship issues start to affect how well we handle the substantive issues." So if you're having problems with a colleague, it's important to address them head-on. But simply changing your own attitude isn't enough. "The self-help bromide is *'I have to change myself and not let it get to me, so I'll meditate or just let it go,'*" she says. "But how long can you do that before your blood starts to boil?"

The answer, instead, is to change the relationship dynamic. McLain Smith advises stepping back to evaluate your interactions – even going so far as to transcribe your conversations immediately after the fact, to capture the nuances of what you say to each other. "You can't come up with an intelligent way of altering the dynamic until you know what the dynamic is," she says.



Are bad workplace relationships the elephant in the room at your company? (Photo credit: Wikipedia)

“You have to map the interaction, which creates a way of understanding how each person’s behavior is eliciting a behavior the other person doesn’t like.”

For instance, you may find yourself in a pattern of forcefully advocating for a position with your colleague, which he strongly opposes. But if you step back to ask about his concerns and what he’s trying to accomplish – and begin to address those goals – he might not feel the need to oppose you so much. “You need tools to help you look at the relationship patterns,” says McLain Smith. “Without that, you’ll always default to thinking it’s about the individual. It becomes the usual suspects – he doesn’t really care, he doesn’t get it, what a jerk.”

Indeed, she says, “People tend to think in terms of motives and people’s character, despite the fact that cognitive psychology has proved for the last 30 years that when people act one way and not another, it’s more often due to situational factors rather than due to character.” The upshot? Your dynamics with your colleagues, no matter how well established, are not permanent and intractable. Instead – with time and practice – you can change and improve the way you relate.

What are your strategies for dealing with difficult co-workers? How do you work to build strong relationships?

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