Working with difficult people

By ACS Career Navigator

Sometimes you find yourself working with someone with whom you just don’t get along. Maybe their personality is grating, or their political views are different from yours. Maybe they are a font of useless knowledge. Whatever the reason, you constantly conflict. Still, you need to figure out how to work together.

Evaluate. How you choose to deal with a difficult person depends on many factors, including how much you need them, how long the project will go on, and how significant the impact on your professional life will be. When you first realize there is a problem, take a long, objective look and determine the source. Is this a change in the other person’s behavior that may reverse itself, or have they always been this way and are they unlikely to change? Do they not know what they are doing, or do they just not care?

Work with them. Find a time to speak with them calmly, privately, and nonconfrontationally. Maintain your calm, and use “I” language: Describe your experiences and what you see without attacking or accusing them. Use concrete examples and offer specific suggestions for ways they can change to help you. In an ideal world, they will be enlightened and apologize for their past behavior, but in reality, they may become defensive.

Work without them. If you can’t get them to change their behavior, can you change yours? Can you minimize interactions and still get your work accomplished? Can you downgrade from in-person conversations to phone calls, or from phone calls to e-mail, without introducing new misunderstandings? Look for other ways to get the resources you need. Do they have an assistant who can help you, or is there a colleague who gets along with both of you and will run interference?

Work with others. Are there others who are having the same issue? Talk to others, discreetly of course, and feel them out about the issue. Maybe they have found a way to work with this person and you can adopt that approach. Maybe several of you can work together around this other person. Document everything. You may be able to enlist the support of your supervisor to talk to their supervisor. You can also band together to make management aware of the scope of the problem. If nothing else, it will make you feel better to know that you are not alone.

Leave. If you are unable to do your job effectively because of this situation, it’s time to leave. You can ask to be transferred to another project or department, or even start looking for a new job. At the very least, you can refuse to work on the next project with that person, or set some specific ground rules in advance with your supervisor.

It’s no fun to go into work and battle every day, and you shouldn’t have to. Take the necessary steps to identify and deal with the problem, and the short-term pain will be more than made up for by the long-term gain.

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