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Dealing With Difficult Co-Workers

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Academic Leadership Journal

Leadership Tip Dealing With Difficult Co-Workers

There's one in every workplace.

He's the colleague who is always late to work and never meets a deadline. He's always apologetic and ready with an excuse and promises this is really the last time he'll ask for a favor. You've been the nice guy, even covering up for him, but now you're sick of it.

Or it might be the coworker who takes credit for work you did, steals your ideas and talks about you to others. A master of double-talk and double-dealing, she'll deny everything and try to convince you—and others—that you're the crazy one. You're so angry and obsessed with her behavior, sometimes you wonder if you are going crazy.

Until recently, focus has been on how to manage the difficult boss or managing employees. The issue of problem coworkers has received less attention, yet in one study, 80% of people reported that a single coworker contributed significant stress to their work day.

This stress isn't just dangerous to employees; it has a negative impact on the entire company or workplace. It can lead to poor work performance, absenteeism and health problems. Sometimes outstanding employees who see no solution to a toxic coworker look for a new job. In today's competitive work environment where finding and retaining talented people is increasingly difficult, this is a loss few companies can afford.

Complaining to management about a problem coworker is often ineffective and can backfire, making you look like the problem. But, there are some effective steps you can take to deal with this common workplace challenge. Remember, if you believe you have some control, you do.

Look to Yourself First

Are you the problem? Do you listen without interrupting? Do you take everything personally? Are you willing to change? Taking responsibility for your part will make it much clearer how to proceed with a problem peer.

Make Sure This Isn't About Personality or Office Politics

Gender, race, culture and religion affect behavior in the workplace. In her book *Problem People at Work*, management consultant Marilyn Wheeler outlines some common ways men and women are different at work, and says that neither approach is better than the other. For example, numerous studies on work and gender show that men tend to focus on one thing at a time and value results over process, while women focus on many things at one time and often value the process as much as the results.

What may be offensive to you may be normal to someone of another race or culture. Understanding

critical gender, racial and cultural issues can put the problem in perspective.

Classify the Problem Objectively

Measuring the problem helps make it less threatening. Not every problem colleague is the same. One approach is to identify if this situation falls into one of three categories: difficult, challenging or toxic. Knowing this will help you take the right steps.

Difficult

This is a situation that can usually be solved by a single action. For example, your coworker loves to schmooze and interrupts your work flow with comments, personal problems or requests for help. A one-on-one friendly conversation in which you explain the problem usually helps. Offering to go to lunch together or setting a scheduled time to talk will help avoid turning a pest into an enemy.

Challenging

This is a situation that requires more work on an ongoing basis. Take the coworker who turns every situation into a competition and can't seem to grasp the concept of teamwork. In her book *Working with Difficult People*, communications consultant Muriel Solomon strongly suggests taking control immediately when a coworker is deceitful, manipulative or exploitive. Stay calm, be firm and up-front. Refuse to be drawn in, but state how you see the problem as clearly and courteously as possible. Understand that this behavior has insecurity and fear at the root, therefore puncture this person's influence, not his pride. Like medicine for a patient, you may have to repeat this several times as needed.

Toxic

Like some chemicals in the workplace, some coworkers may be truly harmful to your health. In fact, these people are like "a hidden cancer" in the workplace, according to psychologists Alan A. Cavaola and Neil J. Lavender. In their book *Toxic Coworkers: How to Deal with Dysfunctional People on the Job*, they list a range of personality disorders that, when taken to extreme, can tear a workplace apart.

Examples are the coworker at the center—and usually the cause—of every office blow-up. Histrionic and explosive, this person can't get control of his temper or emotions, and the workplace is in constant turmoil. Or it might be more hidden, like the colleague who can sniff out and exploit every one of her coworkers' weaknesses. She's the boss' pet and the office poison.

Because people with true personality disorders actually view their symptoms as strengths, it's hard to confront them. In some cases, the best solution is to avoid this person as much as possible, keeping all interactions matter-of-fact and brief. If the situation is truly harmful, some consultants advise that you document examples. This may be a situation where talking to a manager is your best recourse.

Our jobs and careers are an integral part of who we are. Dealing effectively with problem coworkers can help keep our work lives successful and satisfying.

