

What to do when you have to work with someone you don't like

And if you can't stand a co-worker, chances are they know it

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Why can't we all just get along?

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Jeff (not his real name), like me, is a writer, a speaker and the head of a consulting company. As far as I can tell, he's professional, well respected, capable, honest and has a popular following. Someone we both know has asked us to collaborate on a project and there's clearly a mutual benefit to our working together.

It all sounds great except for one thing: I don't like Jeff.

Something about him rubs me the wrong way. He seems too self-serving or egocentric or self-satisfied. I don't know what it is exactly, but I know I don't like him.

I mentioned that to the person who wants us to work together. She told me, essentially, to get over it. "You don't have to like him," she said, "but you'd be smart to work with him."

So how do you work with someone you don't like?

I'm not simply talking about someone who frustrates you because they communicate poorly or can't run a meeting. Sure it's annoying to have your time wasted, especially when you believe you could do a better job. But that's different than disliking them.

Just think about how you respond differently to someone you like who can't run a meeting (you want to help them) versus someone you don't like (you want to stop working with them, or, if the meeting is really long, kill them).

The typical advice you hear about working with people you don't like is simply to depersonalize the relationship. Just transact whatever business you need to with them and move on. In other words: Grin and bear it.

But I have found that almost impossible to do. The people we don't like drive us crazy and we waste a tremendous amount of time complaining about them, or stressing about a conversation we need to have with them.

And that's not the worst of it. The deeper problem is that if you don't like someone, chances are they know it. Which will prompt them to not like you. And if you think working with someone you don't like is hard, try working with someone who doesn't like you.

It's simple, really. The people you get along with will find ways to help you; the people you don't get along with will find ways to obstruct you.

Being liked has irrefutable benefits. According to research, the more people like you, the easier, more productive and more profitable, your life will be. Which means that someone you don't get along with — even if you grin and bear it — poses a risk.

So if grinning and bearing it is a losing strategy, what's the alternative?

Consider, for a moment, the reason you don't like someone. Maybe you think they're greedy. Or selfish. Or dismissive. Or downright mean. In other words, they have some character flaw or disagreeable trait that bothers you. Like my view of Jeff as self-serving, egocentric and self-satisfied.

Now — and here's the hard part — think about whether, in the dark shadowy parts of your psyche, you can detect shards of that disagreeable trait in yourself.

Can you be greedy, selfish, dismissive or downright mean? You really don't like that part of yourself, right? You wish you could distance yourself from that side of you. Just like you wish you could distance yourself from that disliked person.

In other words, chances are, the reason you can't stand that person in the first place, is that they remind you of what you can't stand about yourself.

Suddenly, working with people you don't like becomes a lot more interesting. Because getting to know them better, and accepting the parts of them you don't like, is actually getting to know yourself better and accepting the parts of yourself you don't like.

So the way to overcome your dislike of someone else? Overcome your dislike of yourself.

That's where the person you don't like can come in handy. Use him to understand yourself better. Consider why you have a problem with him. What does he do that bothers you so much? Move past his inability to run meetings or write a good email and get to what's really bugging you. What about his personality or behaviour sparks annoyance or disgust in you? What do you hate about him?

Then, consider how your answers might be a reflection of you. This is a game and you win by finding that hated behaviour in yourself.

For me, Jeff reflected those attributes about myself that I disliked — the way I can be self-serving and egotistical and self-satisfied.

Think about times when you feel greedy or selfish or dismissive or downright mean. Can you see it? Can you feel your feelings of both attraction and disgust? Can you admit to yourself that it's not black or white? It's black and white. Can you live with the complexity of your humanness? That's the key to being compassionate with yourself.

And being compassionate with yourself is the key to being compassionate with others. Before you know it, you'll actually begin to like people you never liked before. Maybe you'll even feel like helping them run those meeting more productively.

It's now easy for me to see myself in Jeff. I can be self-serving and egotistical and self-satisfied. It's still hard to admit that — especially in writing — but it's a part of who I am and, in the right doses, it actually serves me well.

And there's an added bonus to admitting it: I now like Jeff.