

How to Work with Someone You Hate

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Working with someone you hate can be distracting and draining. Pompous jerk, annoying nudge, or incessant complainer, an insufferable colleague can negatively affect your attitude and performance. Instead of focusing on the work you have to do together, you may end up wasting time and energy trying to keep your emotions in check and attempting to manage the person's behaviour. Fortunately, with the right tactics, you can still have a productive working relationship with someone you can't stand.

What the Experts Say

If you work with someone you don't like, you're not alone. The detested co-worker is a familiar archetype. Robert Sutton, a professor of management science and engineering at Stanford University and the author of *Good Boss, Bad Boss* and *The No Asshole Rule*, says this is part of the human condition. "There are always other people — be they relatives, fellow commuters, neighbours, or co-workers — who we are at risk of tangling with," he says. Avoiding people you don't like is generally a successful tactic but it's not always possible in a workplace. "Some people are there, like it or not," points out Daniel Goleman, the co-director of the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations at Rutgers University and author of *The Brain and Emotional Intelligence: New Insights*. Next time you find yourself shooting daggers at the person in the cubicle next to you, consider the following advice.

Manage your reaction

Your response to your dreaded co-worker may range from slight discomfort to outright hostility. Goleman says the first step is to manage it. He suggests that if there is someone who is annoying or abrasive, don't think about how the person acts, think about how you react. It's far more productive to focus on your own behavior because you can control it. To handle your triggers, Goleman advises you practice a relaxation method daily. This will "enhance your ability to handle stress, which means the annoying person isn't that annoying anymore," he says.

Keep your distaste to yourself

While working through your displeasure, avoid the temptation to gripe with other co-workers. Don't corner someone by the water cooler and say, "There's something about Jessica I don't like, don't you agree?" Sutton notes that we all have a tendency to look for confirmation of our own opinions, but we should also resist it. "Because emotions are so contagious, you can bring everyone down," Sutton says. Besides, complaining about someone in your office can reflect negatively on you. You may garner a reputation as unprofessional or be labelled as the difficult one. If you find you have to vent, choose your support network carefully. Ideally, choose people outside the office.

Consider whether it's you, not them

Once you have your reactions in check, think about what it is you don't like about the person. Is there something specific that sets you off? Is it that she's just different than you? Does he remind you of your father? Do you wish you had her job?

Jealousy and other negative emotions can cause us to wrongly assess and mistreat others. “When someone is doing better than us, we tend to scorn them,” Sutton says. Differences can make us biased. “Our favourite person in the world is ourselves. The more different someone is from us, the more likely we are to have a negative reaction to them,” he says. Focus on the behaviours, not the traits, that irk you; this will help you discern stereotypes from true dislike. “Start with the hypothesis that the person is doing things you don’t like but is a good person,” says Sutton. By better understanding what is bothering you, you may also be able to see your role in it. “It’s reasonable to assume you’re part of the problem,” says Sutton. Be honest with yourself about your share of the issue. And be on the lookout for patterns. “If everywhere you go there’s someone you hate, it’s a bad sign,” Sutton warns.

Spend more time with them

“One of the best ways to get to like someone you don’t like is to work on a project that requires coordination,” says Sutton. This may seem counterintuitive since you likely want to run from the room screaming whenever the person is there. But by working together, you can understand him better and perhaps even develop some empathy. “You might feel compassion instead of irritation,” says Goleman. You may discover there are reasons for his actions: stress at home, pressure from his boss, or maybe he’s tried to do what you’re asking for and failed. Spending more time with your foe will also grant you the opportunity to have more positive experiences. But before you sign up to lead the next task force with someone you don’t like, remember that there is one exception: “If it’s someone who violates your sense of what’s moral, getting away isn’t a bad strategy,” says Sutton.

Consider providing feedback

If none of the above has worked, you may want to consider giving your colleague some feedback. It may be that what bothers you is something that regularly gets in her way as a professional. “Don’t assume the person knows how they are coming across,” says Sutton. Of course, you shouldn’t launch into a diatribe about everything she does to annoy you. Focus on behaviours that she can control and describe how they impact you and your work together. If shared carefully, you may help her develop greater self-awareness and increase her effectiveness.

But proceed cautiously. Goleman says whether you give feedback “depends on how artful you are as a communicator and how receptive they are as a person.” If you feel he might be open and you can have a civilized conversation focused on work issues, then go ahead and tread lightly. But if this is a person you suspect will be vindictive or mad, or will turn it into a personal conflict, don’t risk it. “The landmine when giving emotional feedback is that they take it personally and it escalates,” says Goleman. You also need to be open to hearing feedback yourself. If you don’t like him, the chances are good he isn’t very fond of you either.

Adopt a don’t-care attitude

In situations where you are truly stuck and can’t provide feedback Suttons recommends you “practice the fine art of emotional detachment or not giving a shit.” By ignoring the irritating behaviours, you neutralize the affect on you. “If he’s being a pain but you don’t feel the pain, then there’s no problem,” explains Goleman. This type of cognitive reframing can be effective in situations where you have little to no control.

Principles to Remember

Do:

- Manage your own reaction to the behaviour first
- Practice emotional detachment so the person's behaviours don't bother you
- Spend time trying to get to know the person and better understand what motivates him

Don't:

- Assume that it is all about the other person — you likely play some part
- Commiserate with others who could be unfairly influenced by your negativity or may judge you for your complaints
- Give feedback unless you can focus on work issues and can avoid a personal conflict

Case study #1: Get to know him

Bruno West*, a senior executive in technology, was responsible for a post-merger integration team that included members from both of the pre-merger companies. "It was a highly charged environment with aggressive deadlines and near endless work days," he says. Harry*, the CFO from one of the companies was particularly challenging; he had a caustic style, often spoke in a pejorative way, and even withheld critical information from Bruno and others. Harry was frustrated by Bruno but tried hard to withhold judgment. "I always ask — do I really not like the person or does their experiences and background cause them to address issues different than I do?" he explains. Whether he liked him or not, Bruno knew that he needed Harry's participation to be successful. He decided to spend time with Harry's colleagues in the former company to better understand what it was that Harry brought to the table. They spoke highly of his experience and his long history with the organization. Bruno then took Harry out to dinner and let him vent. "He voiced many concerns and was quite derogatory," Bruno said. Then he asked Harry to talk about some of the projects he had heard about from his former co-workers. "He shared with pride the teamwork, the late evenings filled with collaboration, shared success and accomplishment." At the end of the dinner, Bruno felt he better understood Harry and where he was coming from.

Bruno then slowly began to bring up the other stories about past projects during team meetings and asked Harry to explain what he felt they could learn from those experiences. "Momentum became our friend. He wanted to be recognized for his past accomplishments in the eyes of the new company members. Everyone in the former company knew his great value but he felt he needed to prove himself again," he said. Harry was much more cooperative when others asked for his viewpoint and acknowledged his expertise. Bruno had a much easier time working with him. Harry eventually left the new company but the two parted on good terms.

Case Study #2: Keep a healthy perspective

When Alex Vanier*, a logistics officer with the Canadian Army, returned from a tour of duty in Kandahar, he was assigned to work for Major Newton*, a maintenance officer in Petawawa, an hour and a half northwest of Ottawa. Alex found the major to be standoffish and quick to criticize. Even worse, the major often unloaded work on Alex. "He gave me things that were his to do and were inappropriate for me to handle," he says. The major didn't mentor the people below him and it often seemed he was only looking out for himself. He would ask Alex for candid advice on supply

issues and when Alex replied with what he thought was his confidential perspective, the major would forward on his reply unfiltered to the commander. “I didn’t really enjoy working with him at all. He had this real ‘better than you’ attitude,” he says. Alex tried not to do anything that would put him in close proximity to the major. Since he was his boss, this wasn’t always possible. “I went to work and did my job,” he says. He saw that the major behaved that way with everyone. “I looked at him and thought ‘he has flaws’ but I didn’t take it personally,” he says. He also turned to friends outside of the office with whom he could vent. At one point, Alex thought he would go to the chief of staff to share what was going on but then thought better of it. “I didn’t feel it was my job to go and topple him,” he says. Plus he didn’t want to be seen as a complainer and wasn’t sure sharing his opinion would change anything. Since assignments in the military are often short, Alex decided to wait it out. Eventually the major was sent to another position and Alex filled in for his role for four months. He said it was a vindicating experience because people commented on what a better job he was doing. In the end, Alex says he has no ill will toward the major. He believes it made him more self-aware. “I often ask myself, ‘Is this something I do with my subordinates?’” Ultimately he feels he’s a better manager because of it.

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