



Dealing with Challenging Workplace Relationships

Here are a few questions to ask yourself (in no particular order) the next time you feel you are experiencing a difficult workplace relationship:

- ✚ **Does it matter?** Is this issue really worth your time and energy? If it isn't then don't get bogged down, just move on to your next priority. If it is, then it's worth the effort to resolve it properly.
- ✚ **Why might it be happening?** Everything has a cause. You may never know what that cause is, but if you assume that there is a good reason for the behaviour then you stand a better chance of keeping your cool when you're feeling frustrated, annoyed, put-upon, etc.
- ✚ **Have you explained your position?** Can you calmly and objectively tell them what they are doing and the impact it is having on you? They may not have realised the consequences of their actions.
- ✚ **Have you asked about theirs?** They may not want to tell you but at least you are giving them the opportunity.
- ✚ **Have you clearly defined the problem?** Is it really their lateness or does your annoyance stem from other issues?
- ✚ **Is there any common ground?** If you talk it through you may find you both want the same thing. Anything in common is a good starting point to resolving the conflict.
- ✚ **Can you both have what you want?** If you assume that you can and then try to find a way to make it happen you're more likely to be successful (in other words, think positive!)
- ✚ **If not, where is the acceptable compromise?** What could you both give up and still feel fairly treated?





TIPS:

- 1. Be calm.** Losing your temper and flaring out at the other person typically isn't the best way to get him/her to collaborate with you. It is better to assume a calm persona. Someone who is calm is seen as being in control, centred and more respectable. Would you prefer to work with someone who is predominantly calm or someone who is always on edge? When the person you are dealing with sees that you are calm despite whatever he/she is doing, you will start getting their attention.
- 2. Understand the person's intentions.** We'd like to believe that no one is difficult for the sake of being difficult. Even when it may seem that the person is just out to get you, there is always some underlying reason that is motivating them to act this way. Rarely is this motivation apparent. Try to identify the person's trigger: What is making him/her act in this manner? What is stopping him/her from cooperating with you? How can you help to meet his/her needs and resolve the situation?
- 3. Let the person know where you are coming from.** One thing that can work is to let the person know your intentions behind what you are doing. Sometimes, they are being resistant because they think that you are just being difficult with them. Letting them in on the reason behind your actions and the full background of what is happening will enable them to empathize with your situation. This lets them get them on-board much easier.
- 4. Build a rapport.** With all the computers, emails and messaging systems, work sometimes turn into a mechanical process. Re-instil the human touch by connecting with your colleagues on a personal level. Go out with them for lunches or dinners. Get to know them as people, and not colleagues. Learn more about their hobbies, their family, their lives. Foster strong connections. These will go a long way in your work.
- 5. Treat the person with respect.** As the golden rule says, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."
- 6. Focus on what can be actioned upon.** Whatever it is, acknowledge that the situation has already occurred. Rather than focus on what you cannot change, focus on the actionable steps you can take to forward yourself in the situation.



- 7. Limit your interactions.** If you have already tried everything above and the person is still not being receptive, the best way might be to just ignore. If you haven't been able to form any kind of useful relationship with your colleague then try to avoid working closely with them. After all, you have already done all that you can within your means. Get on your daily tasks and interface with the person only where needed.

- 8. Know your own "stuff":** Everyone has triggers that elicit emotional responses that can impair one's ability to be effective and calm in the heat of the difficult interaction. Pay attention to when you feel your frustrations rising, and note the circumstances; if a situation begins to push your buttons, give yourself a "time-out" by leaving the room, walking away from the computer, or ending the call. A cooling-off period can keep you from being dragged into the emotion of the situation and remain effective.

- 9. Be a dispassionate observer:** Remain detached, neutral, and above the emotion of the conflict. Observe, listen, and let the other person know he's been heard, but do not allow yourself to come down into the scene. You did not make the person difficult, and you cannot "fix" them. You can, however, limit their influence, and not reinforce difficult behaviour.

- 10. Focus on Future Behaviour:** People aren't the problem; it's the behaviour that is the problem. A person can only change future behaviour. A conversation filled with a history of mistakes generates defensiveness and shuts down communication.

