

How to Deal With a Difficult Co-Worker

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It's all too common. Agendas conflict, personalities clash. People get hired for their great skills who turn out to have major issues. Whatever the source, when a colleague (or subordinate or boss) is driving you up the wall, it's up to you to figure out how to cope.

Exiling the person to a desert island probably isn't an option, but here are six strategies that can help:

Accept. To fully accept what is happening in the present moment means letting go of the wish that it will change by itself. It means a commitment to rise above. It means disciplining yourself not to take bait. It can be the hardest step of all, but it also brings a lot of potential for growth.

Anticipate. If you can look ahead to where trouble is likely to happen, it's often possible to avoid or at least mitigate it. Be prepared and be vigilant.

Adjust. If there are frequent misunderstandings or conflicts, make sure that you're doing everything you can on your side. Are you practicing good listening, empathy, and openness? It may not solve the problem, but it can help minimize conflict--and give you a chance to model good responses.

Attune. Is there anything you can appreciate about this person? Even a little edge of positivity gives you something to build on. And look within yourself, too. Remember, we're usually most bothered by the things in others that we dislike in ourselves.

Avoid. If the trouble remains, focus on minimizing crossed paths. Find ways to avoid direct contact, whether that means going through another person or by communicating via e-mail and other technologies. If you have the freedom to work at home, take advantage of that when you can. (But don't subvert other workplace relationships or become a recluse.)

Apply. If you've exhausted all other strategies and you're still miserable, maybe it's time for Plan B--whether it's a change of departments, a transfer to another city, or a different company altogether. Change can be challenging, but it's what keeps careers moving forward.

There will always be annoying, angry, chagrined, cross, irritating, and difficult people in our lives. We may not be able to fix them, but we can always care for and protect ourselves.

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