

# Dealing with a Difficult Co-Worker

## Objective

To identify the things that co-workers do that make your work life difficult and to identify better ways to deal with these problems.

## You Should Know

Nearly every workplace has people who can be difficult to work with. You might have to deal with a bully, an over-talker, an over-sharer, an over-pleaser, an avoider (“It’s not my job!”), a blamer, or a back-stabber; or your co-worker might be incompetent, competitive, or clueless.

All you want to do is get your work done, but these difficult people drive you crazy some, or maybe even most, of the time. In today’s “open” office arrangements, it’s increasingly a luxury to be able to shut the door of your own office and find some privacy.

In a situation that involves abuse, harassment, exploitation, or other deal-breaking behaviors, you should report the person and leave the resolution to authorities. Do not keep secrets or become involved in shady or inappropriate behaviors at your workplace.

Short of something nefarious, however, understand that you are unlikely to change your co-worker’s quirky or annoying personality to suit your needs and preferences. Adapting your own behavior is one strategy. Finding ways to communicate maturely and directly with them is another.

This worksheet is designed to help you learn ways to handle a variety of difficult co-workers while maintaining a good working relationship.

## What to Do

First, think about your co-worker(s) and their behavior. What kind of problems are you encountering? From the list in the paragraph above, which “type” of difficult personality are you dealing with? Is there more than one person who’s making your work life hard? Summarize your current situation below:

Person #1:

---

---

---

---

Person #2:

---

---

---

---

Person #3:

---

---

---

---

Now, write down your current strategies for handling problem situations with difficult co-workers. Do you confront the person? Avoid them? Stew silently? Talk to others about them? Complain to your boss? Have imaginary arguments with them?

---

---

---

---

Now that you've assessed the situation more clearly, here are some tips about what might help you cope with a difficult co-worker:

**1. Discuss the Situation**

Find a mutually agreeable time to talk with the person and calmly tell them your concerns, focusing on the facts, not the feelings involved ("Our joint project was due last Friday, but I haven't received your contribution yet. This has become a pattern. What can we do to resolve this problem?"). You will be modeling a mature, fact-based approach to conflict resolution that could go a long way toward lowering the stress at work and lightening your load.

If the situation involves an annoying behavior, such as talking too loud or playing music, or tapping their fingers constantly, instead of saying, "Would you please STOP doing that?!" use "I" statements, as in, "I'm finding it hard to concentrate on my work when you play music. Would you be good enough to use earbuds instead?"

## **2. Share Your Concerns with a Friend**

Instead of risking the consequences of being an “office gossip,” find a neutral friend or loved one outside of your work situation and tell them your concerns. This gives you a chance to let off steam and also ask for their ideas or opinions.

## **3. Find a Way to Escape**

You don’t always have to address or confront the person directly about their behavior. Avoiding difficult co-workers is a reasonable strategy sometimes. If John or Jane has cornered you yet again in the lunchroom and wants to talk your ear off, find a reason to escape—an appointment, a meeting, a phone call, a deadline. Try this often enough, and they’ll get the point. Mission accomplished.

## **4. Don’t Gossip or Tattle**

Unless there is something dangerous or destructive going on, resist the urge to complain verbally to others or in texts or emails about a difficult co-worker. Your character might end up being questioned or you might be labeled a problem too.

## **5. Consider Kindness and Compassion**

Difficult, annoying people have feelings too. Maybe they’re going through a hard time. Maybe they have a physical or psychological problem they’re struggling with. Kindness goes a long way. Perhaps you have something in common—sports, children, a hobby—that you can connect with them about, thus lowering their “toxicity” in your eyes. Smile, be nice, strike up a conversation, and see what happens.

## **6. Report to Your Boss if a Conflict Can’t Be Resolved**

If after repeated attempts at resolving a conflict, you’re still suffering at work, schedule a time to meet with your supervisor or manager to share your concerns—stick with facts and observable, objective behaviors. For example, rather than saying, “I can’t stand working next to Sally anymore,” present how the person’s behaviors or actions are affecting your work and productivity. Document as much as you can beforehand to bolster your position.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## More to Think About

1. From the options above, which strategies seem the hardest for you and why?

---

---

---

2. Which strategies are the easiest to imagine? Why? Can you commit to trying a hard one even if it feels like it's outside your comfort zone?

---

---

---

3. Try journaling about the types of people in your life who you find "difficult" and think about why. What, if anything, can you change about yourself to be less reactive or bothered by them?

---

---

---

How helpful was this exercise? \_\_\_\_\_

(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What could you do differently to make progress in this area?

---

---

---