

How to Deal with Difficult Co-Workers

By [Dorie Clark](#)

We've all had a co-worker who's driven us nuts – a micromanaging boss, a suck up colleague, a slacker employee. You might think your professional life would improve dramatically if they weren't around. But, says Diana McLain Smith, author of *The Elephant in the Room: How Relationships Make or Break the Success of Leaders and Organizations*, they could actually be your ticket to dramatic professional growth. "Anytime you find yourself up against somebody who frustrates you, that person is telling you that you're at the limits of your competence," she says. "That's why you're frustrated – because you don't know how to deal with them. You need to make a conscious choice: do you need to learn how to deal with that person in order to be successful?"

Interpersonal relationships often get short shrift in the workplace, says McLain Smith, because "we think of business as the rational arena, where it's about analytics and the substance of the work – and of course it is. But very quickly, relationship issues start to affect how well we handle the substantive issues." So if you're having problems with a colleague, it's important to address them head-on. But simply changing your own attitude isn't enough. "The self-help bromide is 'I have to change myself and not let it get to me, so I'll meditate or just let it go,'" she says. "But how long can you do that before your blood starts to boil?"

The answer, instead, is to change the relationship dynamic. McLain Smith advises stepping back to evaluate your interactions – even going so far as to transcribe your conversations immediately after the fact, to capture the nuances of what you say to each other. "You can't come up with an intelligent way of altering the dynamic until you know what the dynamic is," she says. "You have to map the interaction, which creates a way of understanding how each person's behavior is eliciting a behavior the other person doesn't like."

For instance, you may find yourself in a pattern of forcefully advocating for a position with your colleague, which he strongly opposes. But if you step back to ask about his concerns and what he's trying to accomplish – and begin to address those goals – he might not feel the need to oppose you so much. "You need tools to help you look at the relationship patterns," says McLain

Smith. "Without that, you'll always default to thinking it's about the individual. It becomes the usual suspects – he doesn't really care, he doesn't get it, what a jerk."

Indeed, she says, "People tend to think in terms of motives and people's character, despite the fact that cognitive psychology has proved for the last 30 years that when people act one way and not another, it's more often due to situational factors rather than due to character." The upshot? Your dynamics with your colleagues, no matter how well established, are not permanent and intractable. Instead – with time and practice – you can change and improve the way you relate.

What are your strategies for dealing with difficult co-workers? How do you work to build strong relationships?

See the original article published by Forbes [here](#).

> [Difficult Conversations](#)

How to Make Difficult Conversations Easy: 7 Steps From A Clinical Psychologist

1) First, You Need To Keep Calm

You already have one person overreacting. The worst thing would be to have two people overreacting.

2) Treat Them Like A Child

No, I don't mean be condescending. But you wouldn't try to rationalize with a screaming child. And you wouldn't get angry with them for yelling. You'd just dismiss the hysterics and deal with the underlying problem.

3) "Please Speak More Slowly. I'd Like To Help."

Anything that slows the situation down is good for you.

4) Ask "What Would You Like Me To Do?"

Anything that moves them from emotionally reacting to consciously thinking is good.

5) Don't Make Statements. Ask Questions.

Don't Explain.

6) Start Sentences With "I'd Like..." Not "You Are..."

Any sentence that begins with "you are" and does not end with "wonderful" will be experienced as name-calling.

7) Let Them Have The Last Word

Just like explaining is actually an attempt at dominance, so is needing to have the last word. You're shifting your goal from "calming this situation" to "showing them who is right."