

## Working around Personality Clashes

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Many people blame conflicts on personality clashes, but what we perceive as personality clashes may, in fact, be something quite different. Each of us has our own unique mix of attributes and beliefs that make up our personalities. If we clashed with everyone who is different from us, we would be clashing constantly. In fact, we accommodate—and even enjoy—difference, provided it does not threaten our beliefs or values. Indeed, our lives are richer and more exciting when we see the world from the perspective of others.

What is termed a personality clash is often a jarring that occurs when someone challenges a deeply-held value or belief. We view it as a threat, and we fight hard to prove that we are “right” and they are “wrong.” What we are really doing is seeking confirmation that we have no reason to change.

### What You Need to Know

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#### **How can I handle a boss who needles me constantly?**

It may not be an easy thing to do, but try to look at the situation from your boss’s point of view. Try to figure out where he or she is coming from. What is the source of your irritation? Is it that your boss holds a different set of values from your own, or is it that you each expect different things from your role? Values and beliefs are neither rational nor negotiable so any confrontation involving them will only result in a heated and fruitless exchange. Understanding what is really behind the needling may suggest a way forward.

#### **I always seem to clash with a particular coworker and I just can’t stop thinking about it and all the things I “should have” said. What can I do?**

If you view your clash as a personality clash, you are likely to take it to heart because it feels like a threat to your very being. Step back for a moment and analyze your reason for feeling upset. Is your coworker challenging one of your values or beliefs? Is he or she questioning the value that you believe you bring to your work? See if you can examine the situation objectively to determine what is *really* going on.

## **Two members of my team are constantly battling, and they seem to have reached a stalemate. What can I do to get beyond this *impasse*?**

Check with each team member to see that he or she understands the other's role in the team. Sometimes we assume that others know exactly what we think and why. A common form of clash occurs when two people think that they should be doing the same thing or when neither feels a particular responsibility is theirs. One person will see the other as being obstructive and a negative, when it is nothing more than a simple misunderstanding. Explore the issue with your team member and clarify who should be doing what, so that both parties understand clearly what is really happening. It is helpful to follow up with a short summary e-mail to the individuals concerned.

## **Several members of the team I manage are always moaning about their coworkers. How can I restore harmony?**

It is tempting to try to solve the problems that team members have with each other when you are in charge. However, they must take responsibility for their own relationships. Encourage them to share their perceptions by giving constructive feedback to each other. You cannot get involved if you do not have first-hand knowledge of the problem. If your knowledge is based on gossip or hearsay, you will lose your credibility.

## **What to Do**

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### **Understand the Different Ways in Which People “Clash”**

Situations involving apparent personality clashes can quickly deteriorate if they are not handled and resolved properly. People who feel threatened by views and methods that conflict with theirs, often talk to those around them seeking support. This can lead to the development of factions and a generally disruptive work environment.

When a coworker asks you, “Whose side are you on?” you know that things have already deteriorated and that office politics are at work. People who choose sides often have no idea what the crux of the problem is, and may decide whose side they are on simply because they know the person involved or because that person is senior to them.

Because each of us is unique, we often act as our own yardstick and experience others' behavior as positive or negative compared to this. Remember that the difference or difficulty you experience with another person is very likely to be matched by the difference or difficulty he or she experiences with you.

Clashes come in several different guises. They can be:

- *based on different approaches.* A disagreement of this type occurs when people's values and beliefs and ways of expressing them differ. The classic personality types are introvert and extravert, heart-led and head-led. Clashes may happen when, for example, head-led people (the logical ones) are irritated by their heart-led coworkers who act on instinct and feeling and who may not be able to explain their actions as logically as the head-led people would like.
- *based on role-boundary confusion.* These occur when the boundaries of people's roles are unclear.
- *based on a professional difference of opinion or approach.* These occur, for example, when experts disagree on the facts or on the approach to be taken in a specific situation.
- *irrational.* In these situations, people behave unreasonably, for example, by objecting to someone's race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation.

There are a number of ways in which you can survive the pitfalls of personality clashes.

## Decide Whether It Is Really Worth Taking Action

If we accept that everyone is different, we must first decide if it is worth investing time and energy in trying to change someone in order to be comfortable in this person's company. Does this individual have irritating habits that he or she will be willing to change if you make him or her aware of them? Or this person may hold completely opposing views to your own and be averse to discussing them. What are your reasons for considering tackling the issue? Is it because you want the person to like you? Is his or her different approach a personal affront? If so, consider whether it is reasonable to expect this person to change his or her values and beliefs. And remind yourself that he or she maybe irritated by *you* at times too.

Do not let yourself get side-tracked by slight irritations. You will only be wasting time and energy if your efforts do not really make a difference. One way of determining whether it is worth tackling a clash is to reflect on the amount of attention you give it. Do you keep returning to the same sticking point? Does it consume a lot of your time and energy? Does it get in the way of your doing your job? If the answer to these questions is "yes," consider moving forward. But if you can shrug off your coworker's behaviors, do not waste your time. Rarely will another person deliberately set out to annoy you, so accept the situation and move on.

## Deal With the Issue

If you should decide the situation is important enough to deal with, do it **appropriately**:

- Find a private office or meeting room where you can talk undisturbed, and ask your coworker to join you to discuss the situation.

- Describe how you see the situation and ask your coworker if he or she sees it the same way.
- Indicate your willingness to see things from your coworker's point of view and ask if you have understood his or her perspective correctly.
- Show that you appreciate what is going on for the other person and admit to your part in it. Avoid taking the moral high ground.
- Describe what it would be like if you managed to resolve things, and show that you are eager to do so.
- Be polite and listen to your coworker's responses attentively and respectfully.
- Follow up with some feedback that brings the issue into the center of the discussion.
- Ask for feedback from your coworker.
- Try to remain open to their viewpoint and see what common ground you can establish.

Once you get to the root of the problem, you will probably realize that you have the same objectives and a good deal of common ground. Build on these and focus on the sticking points. Keep a broad perspective and try not to get petty: there are some things that just do not matter.

## **Agree On A Way Forward**

If you have followed all the steps above, you may have reached an agreement on where to go from here. You each will have undoubtedly made compromises and concessions along the way, too. It is important to maintain the momentum by agreeing to continue to talk about the issue as much as appropriate, and use the language of your discussion and other agreed signals to keep things on track. If you see that the other person's behavior changes and your relationship becomes more comfortable, show your appreciation by thanking your coworker. Humor can be a wonderful way of dispelling tension. Once you have agreed on the way forward, you may be able to use humor to prevent the clash from returning or to indicate when it is in danger of doing so.

## **Be Prepared to Let Go If Necessary**

Sometimes people become so entrenched their own views that they simply will not change, whatever you do to help them see the world differently. There is no point banging your head against the wall, so just walk away; it is not worth your giving it any more time and energy. You will need all you have to focus on your own work.

Your efforts will not have been entirely in vain, however. In learning how to deal with personality clashes, you will have learned to take responsibility for your own relationships and communication. Although, formal mediation may be able to turn this situation around, it takes it to an extreme that is

more difficult to come back from. Try using the techniques described in this checklist to resolve the situation yourself first.

## What to Avoid

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### **You Talk About It to the Wrong People**

When we feel unhappy about a relationship at work, we may be tempted to talk about it to other coworkers and seek support and sympathy. This may make you feel better in the short term, but others may not respect your confidence; people will talk; and the situation can escalate and become extremely unpleasant. Try to find a trusted coach or mentor to help you with a strategy that will resolve the situation. Often, by hearing yourself talk about an issue you are able to look at it objectively and find a solution.

### **You Avoid the Issue**

Avoiding the issue and hoping that it will go away only leads to more frustration and anger when things do not improve. You need to address the issues before they become too threatening.

### **You Lose Your Objectivity**

Do not let personality clashes affect your professional judgment. Make sure your decisions are not tainted by poor relationships with other people. If you cannot justify your decisions objectively, you may have to face a grievance committee. Ask a trusted coworker, coach, or mentor to help you to scrutinize your decisions and the motivations driving them.

## Where to Learn More

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### **Books:**

Lilley, Roy. *Dealing with Difficult People*. Kogan Page, 2006.

Leibling, Mike. *How People Tick: A Guide to Difficult People and How to Handle Them*. Kogan Page, 2005.

Pincus, Marilyn. *Managing Difficult People: A Survival Guide for Handling Any Employee*. Adams Media, 2004.

## **Web Sites:**

Audio briefing on dealing with really difficult people: [www.briefings.com/audio182.asp](http://www.briefings.com/audio182.asp)

HR Info guide to dealing with difficult people:

[www.hrinz.org.nz/Site/HR\\_Info/Guides/Dealing\\_with\\_Difficult\\_People.aspx](http://www.hrinz.org.nz/Site/HR_Info/Guides/Dealing_with_Difficult_People.aspx)

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