

How to deal with difficult relationships at work

Differences and conflicts in the workplace are not only normal - they are to be expected, and are a healthy sign of a diverse team. One of the key factors determining the success of working relationships is not *whether* there are any conflicts/differences, but *how* they are dealt with. Learning to respond positively to such situations will therefore almost certainly improve the quality of the overall relationship you have with your colleagues.

Here are some points to remember when faced with a difficult relationship at work:

It's probably not personal

Remember that this is a work situation and it is quite likely that the person/s causing you difficulty would probably be doing the same to anyone in your position. So try not to personalise it too much. The perpetrator is normally focused on their own needs and not worrying about you as a person. You represent someone who is getting in the way of their own plans or desires in one way or another, so whilst viewing them as a person do not get pulled into their problem.



Don't try to change them

Difficult people will not change on their own and it is unlikely that you will be able to change them. Although this can be a depressing thought, take comfort in the fact that this at least makes their actions predictable. Just because they won't change it does not mean that you cannot change the situation, or that careful planning can result in a successful outcome for you.

Try to see them as an ally

Being in conflict tends to make people see the "other side" as an enemy, and to look for their mistakes. You need to reverse this, by recognising and reinforcing the positive elements of each person's position within the context of the team as a whole.

Seek to resolve, not to dissolve

Be clear with yourself and with them that you want to reach a win/win resolution. If you get into a head-on battle based on retaliation then you are both likely to have a miserable time. Formulate your strategy and decide what you want the outcome to be. Then concentrate on achieving this, and not on the negative issues or your bad feelings about the person.

Keep it in perspective

Keep the whole situation in perspective. This is just one situation in your life, and you are probably surrounded by many other positive things. Focus on the people who are important to you and seek solace with your colleagues and or clients at work that do support you.

Be prepared

Plan your approach to the situation. Once you are sure that your feelings are reasonable, think strategically about what you would like to change, and the best way of making it happen. Keep in mind your on-going relationship with the person, and don't be afraid to compromise for the sake of a greater goal. Before you approach the person, practice what you're going to say, and establish a positive, assertive frame of mind.

Clarify perceptions

Genuine progress can't be made without understanding on all sides. You need to make sure that everyone fully understands each other's standpoint. Be a good role model by listening with empathy and summarising the main points clearly and unemotionally. Use 'we' statements to describe areas of common ground and to encourage a more collaborative approach.

Focus on shared interests

Identify the things that are important to all concerned. Ask them "What is really important to you?" There are usually multiple interests, and some will be shared, which is the basis for resolution. Recognise that sustaining relationships requires meeting the needs of both. Postpone contentious demands that might damage the relationship until shared interests have been established.

Tackle the difficult stuff

The past can be an impenetrable barrier to the future. People cling on to protect pride and old beliefs. Letting go may be difficult and painful, but is essential to open the gate to the future. Demonstrate and encourage forgiveness (without necessarily offering approval), and try to articulate what usually goes unexpressed. Focus on the feelings of here and now, without picking open old wounds.

Listen to their responses

Whilst you can ensure that you handle a difficult situation assertively, it is not always going to be the case that the other person will immediately agree and show compliance. Even the best suggestions have potential problems and you may be questioned on your ideas. Be careful that you don't see their questioning as disagreement – or you may react aggressively (by arguing your point) or non-assertively (by quickly backing down). Try to handle their response reasonably, and assertively.

Suggest options for the future

Find ways of creatively identifying alternatives together. Listen and give proper consideration to all ideas without dismissing any offhand. Discuss ways of inventing new options to meet shared needs.

Agree mutual benefits

Before agreeing to action, make sure everyone feels that a win-win solution has been found (although compromises may need to be made along the way). Construct a detailed vision of the future. Don't rush this stage.

Agree action

Develop quick wins; that is, things that can immediately be done to bring both sides closer to the shared goal. Ensure that you are both clear about any action that is required. Don't rely on temporary quick fixes that are not sufficient to meet the longer-term solution. Encourage personal accountability by suggesting that you review the situation after a practical length of time – and make sure you both stick to it. If people don't feel responsible, you haven't reached a full resolution.

Would you or others in your team benefit from training in conflict management?

We hope that you'll find these tips useful. However, most people derive huge additional benefit from the interaction, practical exercises and valuable feedback that face-to-face training gives. H2 offers bespoke training in conflict management and dealing with difficult relationships at work from just £62 + VAT per person per day

Here's what some satisfied customers said after attending our training in conflict management:

- *“Thank you for an excellent day - I feel a lot more confident about facing up to a particularly difficult relationship now, and am keen to turn it round and make it work.”*
- *“The course helped to reinforce how important it is to tackle difficult issues, rather than to let them fester”*
- *“This was excellent - what I've been needing for a long time!”*
- *“Dealing effectively with difficult relationships is vital for the sake of everyone. I've learnt some really practical tips for addressing some on-going problems.”*

Contact H2 Training & Consultancy: Freephone: 0800 0015 151 or Email: h2@h2training.com