

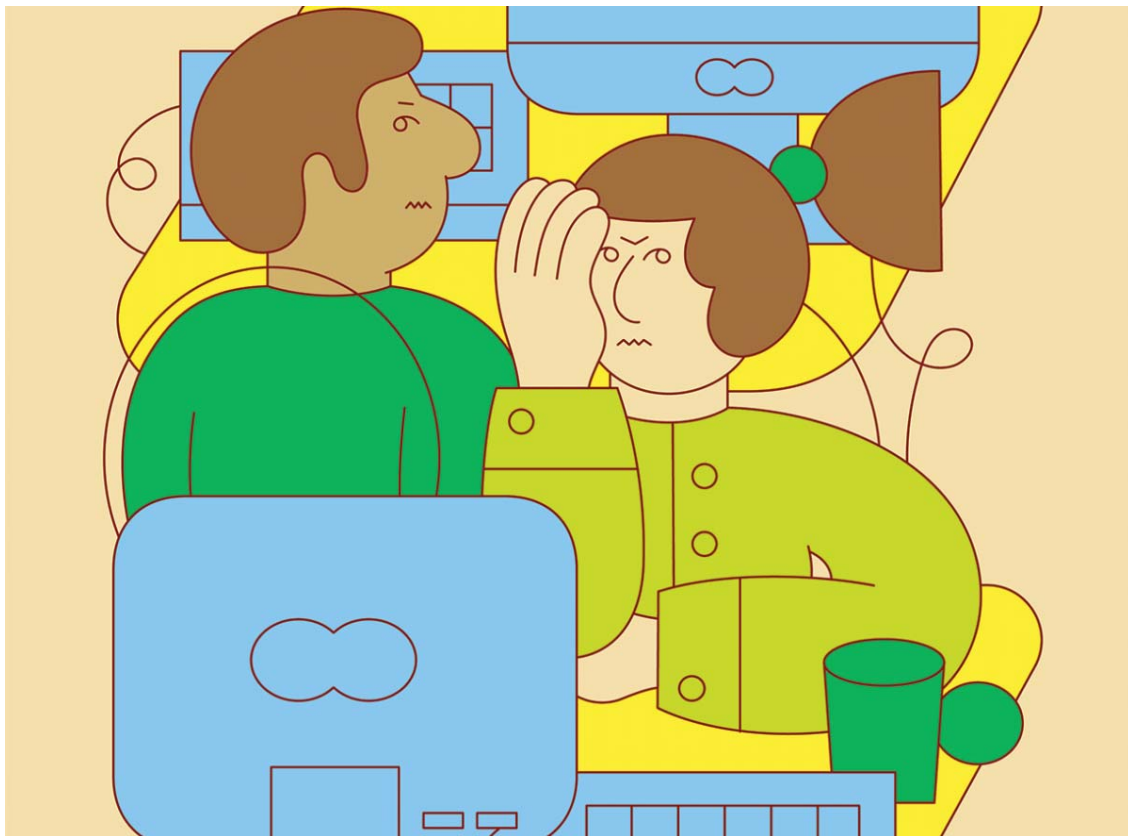
**Harvard
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Review**

Managing Conflicts

How to Navigate Conflict with a Coworker

by Amy Gallo

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Martina Paukova

Summary. Interpersonal conflicts are common in the workplace, and it's easy to get caught up in them. But that can lead to reduced creativity, slower and worse decision-making, and even fatal mistakes. So how can we return to our best selves? Having studied conflict... [more](#)

Early in my career I took a job reporting to someone who had a

reputation for being difficult. I'll call her Elise. Plenty of people warned me that she would be hard to work with, but I thought I could handle it. I prided myself on being able to get along with anyone. I didn't let people get under my skin. I could see the best in everyone.



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Two months later I was ready to quit.

Elise worked long days and on weekends and expected her team to do the same. Her assumptions about what could get done in a day were wildly unreasonable. She often followed up at 8:30 AM on a request she'd made at 6:00 the night before. She disparaged my teammates in front of me, questioning their work ethic and commitment to the company. She would scroll through colleagues' calendars and point out how little they'd accomplished despite having a meeting-free day.

I vowed to stop caring so much about how she acted and to treat her with kindness. In a good week I could succeed. But more often than not those lofty intentions flew out the window. The minute she insinuated that I wasn't working hard enough, I would clench my teeth, roll my eyes behind her back, and complain about her to my coworkers.

Interpersonal conflicts like that—with insecure bosses, know-it-all colleagues, passive-aggressive peers—are common at work, and it's easy to get caught up in them. In one study 94% of respondents said they had worked with a “toxic” person in the previous five years. Another survey—of 2,000 U.S. workers—indicated that their top source of tension on the job was relationships. Trapped in these negative dynamics, we find it

hard to be our best selves or to improve the situation. Instead we spend time worrying, react in regrettable ways that violate our values, avoid difficult colleagues, and sometimes even withdraw from work entirely. But those responses can lead to a host of bad outcomes, including reduced creativity, slower and worse decision-making, and even fatal mistakes. For example, as Christine Porath wrote for the *New York Times*, in “a survey of more than 4,500 doctors, nurses and other hospital personnel, 71 percent tied disruptive behavior, such as abusive, condescending or insulting personal conduct, to medical errors, and 27 percent tied such behavior to patient deaths.”

None of us is perfect when it comes to navigating the complexity of human relationships. Especially in times of stress, or when we feel threatened, even the most seasoned workplace veterans can find themselves focusing on the short-term goal of ego or reputation protection (*I need to win this argument or to look good in front of my team*) rather than the long-term one of behaving honorably and preserving collegiality.

So how can we return to our best selves? Having studied conflict management and resolution over the past several years, I’ve outlined seven strategies that will help you work more effectively with difficult colleagues. These aren’t silver bullets that will magically transform your problem coworker into your best friend, but they should make your interactions more tolerable if not more positive. And they’ll help you build interpersonal resilience so that you feel less stressed when you’re engaged in a conflict and can bounce back from it more quickly.

1. Remember That Your Perspective Is Just One Among Many

We all come to the workplace with different viewpoints and values. We might disagree on everything from whether it’s OK to be five minutes late to a meeting to acceptable ways of interrupting a colleague to the appropriate consequences for someone who’s made a mistake. It’s not realistic to expect your

boss, teammates, or reports to see eye to eye with you all the time.

When such differences of opinion arise, however, most of us believe that we're seeing the issue objectively and correctly, and anyone who has another view is uninformed, irrational, or biased. Social psychologists refer to that tendency as *naive realism*. For example, in one study, participants who were asked to tap out the rhythm of a well-known song, such as "Happy Birthday," predicted that listeners would be able to name the tune about 50% of the time. They were sure that it would be clear to others what they were trying to convey. But the guesses were accurate only 2.5% of the time! Once we're confident about something—whether it's our ability to tap out a song or the solution to this quarter's budget shortfall—we find it hard to imagine that others won't see it the same way.

It's important to recognize and resist this gut reaction. Challenge your own perspective by asking questions such as: How do I know that what I believe is true? What if I'm wrong? How would I change my behavior? What assumptions have I made? How would someone with different values and experiences see things? The answers to those questions matter less than the exercise of asking them. They are a good way of reminding yourself that your view is just that: *your view*. Not everyone sees things the same way—and that's OK.

Indeed, you and your colleagues don't need to reach consensus on "the facts" of what's happened or who's to blame for a problem. Instead of spending hours debating whose interpretation is correct, shift your focus to what should happen going forward.

2. Be Aware of Your Biases

Biases creep into all sorts of workplace interactions. One common derailer of colleagues' relationships is *fundamental attribution error*—an inclination to assume that other people's behavior has more to do with their personality than with the situation, while believing the opposite of oneself. For example, you might

presume that a teammate who's late to a meeting is disorganized or disrespectful rather than caught in traffic or stuck in another meeting that went long. But when *you're* running behind, you might focus on the circumstances that led to your tardiness.

A related cognitive shortcut that creates problems is *confirmation bias*, or the tendency to interpret events or evidence as proving the truth of existing beliefs. If your view of your colleague Andrew is already negative, you're more likely to interpret his actions as further evidence that he's not up to the task, he's unkind, or he cares only about himself—and it will be increasingly difficult for him to prove you wrong.

Even what we consider difficult behavior can be shaped by the prejudices we carry into the workplace. Earlier in my career I worked with a client—a Black woman—whose ideas I hesitated to challenge, even though that was part of my job as a consultant. I was afraid I'd get a strong reaction, despite the fact that she had never so much as raised her voice in previous encounters. I had fallen into believing the “angry Black woman” stereotype. Now I know to watch out for *affinity bias*, an unconscious tendency to align with people who are similar to us in appearance, beliefs, and background. Research shows that when colleagues aren't like us—in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, education, physical abilities, or position at work—we are less comfortable around them and thus less likely to want to work with them.

How can you interrupt those biases? First, get a better sense of your susceptibility to them by taking an online quiz such as the one from Project Implicit, a nonprofit started by researchers at Harvard, the University of Washington, and the University of Virginia. When you're struggling with a coworker, ask yourself, What role could my biases be playing here? Is it possible I'm not seeing the situation clearly because I'm making assumptions about this person, or unwilling to rethink my initial impression, or unconsciously focusing on our differences?

Play devil's advocate and question your own interpretation of the situation. I learned the “flip it to test it” approach from a TEDx talk by Kristen Pressner, the global head of human resources at a multinational firm: If your colleague was a different gender, race, or sexual orientation or had a different place in the hierarchy, would you make the same assumptions? Would you say the same things or treat that person the same way?

Finally, ask someone you trust—and who will tell you the truth—to help you reflect on the ways in which you might be seeing the situation unfairly.

3. Don't Make It “Me Against Them”

In a disagreement it's easy to think in polarizing ways: “me versus you,” enemies at war. One person is being difficult; the other isn't. One person is right; the other is wrong.

To break out of that mental model, instead imagine that there are not two but three entities in the situation: you, your colleague, and the dynamic between you. Maybe that third entity is something specific: a decision you must make together or an assignment you need to complete. Or maybe it's more general: ongoing tension or rivalry between you or bad blood over a project gone wrong. Rather than work to change your colleague, try to make progress on that third thing.

Take Andre, who was struggling with his colleague Emilia. Whenever he proposed a new idea, she produced a list of reasons why it would never work. For a long time Andre saw the two of them as opponents. When I asked how he pictured their dynamic, he told me he saw a dark cloud over her head and a bright sun over his. But that visualization reinforced his view of the situation, prompting him to brace for battle every time he spoke with her. Eventually he decided to shift to less-antagonistic thinking. He started to picture the conflict between them as a seesaw. Though they sat on opposite ends, they could perhaps work together to find balance. That helped him view her as a

collaborator rather than an adversary.

No one wants to have a nemesis at work. So think of problematic coworkers as colleagues with whom you share a problem to be solved.

4. Know Your Goal

To avoid drama and stay focused on the work, you need to be clear about your goals. Do you want to get a project over the finish line? Build a healthy working relationship that will last into the future? Feel less angry or frustrated after your interactions?

Make a list of your goals (big and small) and then circle the most important ones. Your intentions will determine—consciously and subconsciously—how you act. For instance, if your goal is to avoid getting stuck in long discussions with a pessimistic colleague, you'll need to take actions different from those you'd take if your goal was to keep the person's nay-saying from bringing down the team.

It's fine to set your sights low. Often it's enough to focus on just having a functional relationship—getting to a point where your skin doesn't crawl when Ethan's name shows up in your in-box or you're not losing sleep at night because Marjorie is making your life miserable. Multiple and more-ambitious goals are OK too. For example, if you're arguing with your insecure boss about which metrics to report to the senior leadership team, your goals might be to: (1) come up with stats that you can both live with, (2) make sure the senior team knows about your expertise, and (3) find a way to avoid heated disagreements before big meetings in the future.

Once you've decided what you want to accomplish, write it down on a piece of paper. Research has shown that people who vividly describe or picture their goals are 1.2 to 1.4 times as likely to achieve them, and that objectives recorded by hand are more likely to be realized. Refer to your goals before interacting with

your colleague to keep your eyes on the prize.

5. Avoid Workplace Venting and Gossip—Mostly

It's natural to turn to others when something is off at work. You might want to confirm that you're not misinterpreting a vague email, get advice on advancing a stalled initiative, or simply be reassured that you're a good person. And if your colleague says, "Yes, Greta does seem grumpy. What's up with that?" you get a little jolt of relief: *It's not just me.*

That type of side conversation, whether it happens digitally or in person, can be considered venting. But you might also call it gossip. Despite its bad rap, research shows, gossip can play an important role in bonding with coworkers. When you learn that Marina in marketing also finds Michael in finance difficult and knows of others who feel the same, it fosters a sense of connection. You've essentially formed an in-group that has information that others, especially Michael, don't. And Marina's validation of your perspective gives you a rush of feel-good adrenaline and dopamine.



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Studies have also shown that gossip can be beneficial in deterring people from behaving selfishly. If difficult colleagues realize that others are speaking badly of them and warning teammates about working with them, they're more likely to change their ways.

Of course, there are also dangers to venting and gossiping. First, they heighten the risk of confirmation bias. Sure, Michael may be exasperating sometimes, but once you and your work friends start

talking about it, you're more likely to interpret his future actions in a negative light. Occasional missteps are painted as an inherent trait, and the "Michael is difficult" storyline becomes entrenched. Second, gossiping often reflects poorly on the gossiper. Although you may get the immediate validation you're seeking, you may also get a reputation for being unprofessional—or end up labeled as the difficult one.

It is perfectly legitimate to seek help with sorting out your feelings or to check with someone else that you're seeing things clearly. But choose whom you talk to (and what you share) carefully. Look for people who are constructive, have your best interests at heart, will challenge your perspective when they disagree, and can be discreet.

6. Experiment to Find What Works

There isn't one right way to get a know-it-all to stop being condescending or your passive-aggressive colleague to deal with you in a more straightforward way. The strategies you choose will depend on the context: who you are, who the other person is, the nature of your relationship, the norms and culture of your workplace, and so on.

Start by coming up with two or three methods you want to test out. Often small actions can have a big impact. Then design an experiment: Determine what you'll do differently, pick a period of time to try it out, and see how it works. For example, if you want to improve communication with a difficult colleague, you might decide that for two weeks you're going to ignore that person's tone and focus on the underlying message. Don't assume the tactic will fix everything wrong between you; view it as an experiment that will teach you something, even if it's only that the approach doesn't work.

Keep trying, tweaking, and refreshing experiments or abandoning ones that don't produce results. For example, if you've tried to handle a colleague's lack of follow-through by sending post-

meeting emails that confirm what everyone has agreed to do, but the person still fails to keep promises, then don't keep sending the emails expecting different results. Try something else. As the conflict expert Jennifer Goldman-Wetzler explains, you'll need to find another way to "interrupt the conflict pattern of the past"—often by doing something the other person doesn't expect.

7. Be—and Stay—Curious

Salvador Minuchin, an Argentine therapist, wrote, "Certainty is the enemy of change." When dealing with a negative coworker, it's easy to think, *It's always going to be this way* or *That person will never change*. But resignation and pessimism will get you nowhere. Instead, adopt a curious mindset and maintain hope that your troubled relationship can be improved.

Research shows that curiosity brings a host of benefits: It wards off confirmation bias, prevents stereotyping, and helps us approach tough situations not with aggression (fight) or defensiveness (flight) but with creativity. The key is to shift from drawing often unflattering conclusions to posing genuine questions. When your colleague Jada starts complaining that she's doing more work than anyone else on the team, don't think, *Here we go again with Jada's attitude*. Instead ask yourself, What's going on with her? This feels familiar, but what have I missed in the past? Why is she acting like this?

Try to catch yourself in unproductive thought patterns; then step back and take stock, Who gets along well with Jada, and how do they interact with each other? Have there been times when Jada was more pleasant and cooperative? What was different about those situations?

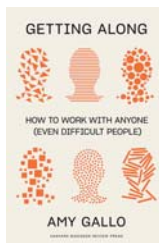
When you hit a rough patch with someone, think about instances at work or elsewhere when you and another person didn't get along at first but were able to get past it, and reflect on those experiences with curiosity. How were you able to persevere? What helped you achieve resolution? Finally, consider exactly what you

stand to gain from meeting the goals you've set out to achieve in a work relationship. Project into the future. If you overcome the conflict, what will be different? How will your work life improve?

You can't be certain of what the future holds for you and your colleague, so be curious instead. It may snap you out of a mindset that's keeping you from discovering an unexpected solution to your problem.

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No matter what type of difficult colleague you're dealing with or what you decide to do next, these seven strategies can improve your odds of responding productively, establishing appropriate boundaries, and building stronger, more fulfilling collaborations at work. Sometimes change isn't possible, in which case you'll eventually need to cut your losses in a relationship and focus on protecting your career and well-being. But I've found that with good-faith efforts and hard work, even some of the trickiest interpersonal conflicts can be resolved.



Editor's note: Amy Gallo is the author of Getting Along: How to Work with Anyone (Even Difficult People) (Harvard Business Review Press, 2022), from which this article is adapted.

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Amy Gallo is a contributing editor at Harvard Business Review, cohost of the Women at Work podcast, and the author of two books: *Getting Along: How to Work with Anyone (Even Difficult People)* and the *HBR Guide to Dealing with Conflict*. She writes and speaks about workplace dynamics. Watch her TEDx talk on conflict and follow her on Twitter.

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