

Guide to Getting Along With Difficult People



Every workplace has conflict — clashes of opinions, expectations and work styles. It's normal with any group of people whose perspectives, priorities and values differ.

It's not conflict itself that's the problem. It's how we work through moments of tension to prevent them from growing into something bigger.

Why don't people get along at work?

Conflict often happens when one person's concerns don't match another's. There's more to it than the "personality clashes" that are sometimes blamed.

Two key causes:

- **Miscommunication** — When information isn't shared or communication is unclear, there's ambiguity, misunderstanding, disagreement or misaligned expectations.
- **Organizational systems** pit people against each other — Workers compete for limited resources, pursue different priorities, juggle interdependencies or navigate role silos.

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What to do to keep harmless conflict from turning into a battle:

1 Build emotional awareness and regulation.

Understand your emotional triggers. Are there certain words or behaviors that always bug you a little more than they should? For example, when someone cancels plans at the last minute, you might feel rejected even though you know it couldn't be avoided on their end. Knowing your triggers is the first step in controlling how you respond.

Know your strengths and weaknesses. Be mindful of your effect on others. You may be the office chatterbox. Because of that you have strong work relationships. Others may see your chatting as a distraction. Begin considering how you can adapt as needed to the people around you.

Consider others' emotional triggers. How can you tell when you've pushed someone else's buttons? Watch for changes in body language, tone, emotional word choices, or other physical changes. Being more aware of these sensitivities helps you avoid them, creating healthier relationships.

2 Express your needs and boundaries openly and calmly.

See disagreement as an opportunity. Input from multiple knowledgeable people should lead to discussion, understanding, and problem-solving. Encourage input even when you know it might be contrary to other ideas. Say something like, “I’d love to hear your thoughts on that.”

Express your views confidently. Practice speaking up in an organized, concise way that helps people easily grasp your perspective.

Remember it’s not about winning. The goal of assertiveness isn’t to get your way, it’s to make sure all voices are heard so the best solutions emerge.

3 Communicate clearly and constructively.

Listen fully first. When you listen, don’t think about what you’re going to say. Instead, focus fully and try to understand not only what they’re saying, but what they’re not saying and the emotions and concerns behind the words. What’s the “why” behind their behavior, idea, or opinion?

Respond calmly using the right tone. When there’s disagreement, always pause to consider your words before speaking.

Prevent conflict by getting on the same page early. Friction often occurs when expectations don’t align. We have unspoken boundaries for behavior or outcomes. Or we communicated the expectations but never stopped to confirm the other person’s understanding.

4 Create trusting relationships before you need them.

Demonstrate integrity in all your actions. Follow through on commitments. Give credit where credit is due. Keep confidences. Own your mistakes. Don’t gossip. This prevents skepticism and people questioning your motives.

Assume the best of people. Always consider someone’s actions in an objective way without jumping to conclusions about their intent. Make it your goal to truly understand the other person’s perspective and feelings.

Get to know people on a personal level. Be genuinely interested in your colleagues’ lives. Trust is built gradually.

Demonstrate competence and willingness to learn. People assess our expertise by our actions. Keep learning about your field and share what you learn so it benefits everyone.

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What to do when conflict escalates:

1 Pause and stay calm.

When emotions rise, slow things down. Reacting in the moment tends to escalate conflict

Take a 10-20 minute break if you're not calm.

Avoid responding in the heat of the moment (email, chat, or in-person).

Identify what you're feeling (frustration, defensiveness, disrespect).

Ask yourself what happened and why you're unhappy (behavior, communication, expectations).

Separate facts from assumptions (what happened vs. the assumed intent behind it).

Consider the cause (a system or some type of miscommunication). It can help to look at patterns.

Be clear on how it affects you or your work

2 Address it directly with constructive communication.

Avoiding conflict won't resolve anything and can make things worse.

The setting matters:

Choose a private, neutral space.

Have the conversation in-person or video (rather than over email).

Be prompt but not impulsive.

Prepare to own your part of the friction.

Start the conversation:

State the problem simply and objectively: "I've noticed there's tension between us. My goal is to understand if there's something I'm doing that's causing this so we can find a better way going forward."

Use "I" statements and neutral language: "The deadline shifted without notice" vs. "You changed the deadline and didn't tell anyone."

Avoid accusatory language: "You make things difficult..."

Avoid absolutes: "You never..." "You always..."

Avoid personal attacks: "You're unreliable."

Listen to understand:

Let the other person explain their perspective fully.

Don't interrupt or plan your rebuttal while they're talking.

Ask questions to help the other person explain things, rather than to gain evidence to support your own position.

Reflect back what you hear: "So what I'm hearing is..."

Focus fully and try to understand not only what they're saying, but what they're not saying and the emotions and concerns behind the words

Move toward a solution:

Remember that most work conflicts come from misalignment, not bad intent.

Identify shared goals by asking: “What are we both trying to achieve?”

Reframe the conversation as “us vs. the problem” instead of “me vs. you.”

Brainstorm options together.

Focus on what can change going forward.

Agree on specific actions, clear expectations, and communication norms.

Document key takeaways in writing in a neutral way: “Here’s what we aligned on today...”

Notice and acknowledge any incremental improvements.

3 Know when to elevate the problem to a manager.

Escalation isn’t failure. Consider times when it might be necessary.

The issue continues despite attempts to resolve it.

There’s a power imbalance.

There’s disrespectful, unprofessional, or harmful behavior.

The conflict is impacting work outcomes.

People and their emotions are unpredictable. We have to be sensitive to the way we make people feel, even when we don’t agree. That’s why it’s important to always take a calm, intentional approach to work interactions.

