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Dealing with Co-workers We Don't Like

Abstract

When we take a job with a company, we instantly develop a large network of new acquaintances. The relationships we have with co-workers are called “nonvoluntary relationships” because as long as we hold a job with that organization, we have no choice but to interact with the other people who work there.

As long as we like our co-workers, the nonvoluntary nature of these relationships is unremarkable, but for most of us it is inevitable that we won't like a few of those people. This can cause a difficult situation. Relationships with co-workers we don't like are stressful. The stronger our disdain and the more closely we have to work with such individuals, the more stress these relationships cause.

This article covers:

- * How to cope
- * What research tells us
- * Tips for dealing with people we don't like
- * The importance of mastering this skill

Disciplines

Communication | Interpersonal and Small Group Communication | Organizational Communication | Other Communication | Speech and Rhetorical Studies

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Dealing With Co-workers We Don't Like

By Jonathan A. Hess, Ph.D.

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Stressful Situations

When we take a job with a company, we instantly develop a large network of new acquaintances. The relationships we have with co-workers are called “nonvoluntary relationships” because as long as we hold a job with that organization, we have no choice but to interact with the other people who work there.

As long as we like our co-workers, the nonvoluntary nature of these relationships is unremarkable, but for most of us it is inevitable that we won't like a few of those people. This can cause a difficult situation. Relationships with co-workers we don't like are stressful. The stronger our disdain and the more closely we have to work with such individuals, the more stress these relationships cause.

How to Cope

So, what can we do about it? Learning to like that individual is a noble avenue to pursue, and it is sometimes possible with the right attitude and positive treatment of the other person. Sometimes just listening to that individual or getting to know more about her or him is enough to transform resentment into respect. After all, perceiving others as different from ourselves is one of the biggest causes of disliking.

If we can focus on ways in which we're similar with others we can often overcome hatred. Another useful approach is to try to understand the other person's feelings. It is difficult to hate a person when you empathize with the problems that he or she faces.

It is unrealistic, however, to think that everyone can just learn how to love every person they know. Suppose you try to like your colleague, and no matter how hard you try, you still find the person just as revolting as ever?

I believe that learning to like each other is a good ideal to work toward, but there is no shame in disliking some people, and disliking should not be an impediment to civil and effective work relationships.

What Research Tells Us

What does research about human behavior tell us about such relationships? First, our most basic reaction to the stress of these relationships is to try to avoid the other person. This can be a good strategy where possible. You might take your break at a different time than that person or eat

lunch in a different location to avoid having to be around that individual. You should be careful, however, not to avoid interacting with the person on necessary functions of your job, because that can interfere with the tasks that need to be done.

Furthermore, there are other possible problems associated with avoiding a person. For instance, Robert Baron contends that when supervisors avoid giving negative feedback to subordinates they may get into a cycle in which they let the resentment build up to the point at which they can no longer contain it, and then erupt by inappropriately lashing out toward the person.

As a result, the subordinate feels mistreated, and is likely feel resentment toward the company and may even try some form of retaliation. What can you do to cope with stress without avoiding the person? In my own research, I have found that people do this by creating psychological distance between themselves and the disliked persons. Psychological distance is a term referring to the emotional barricade we build to make ourselves feel like our relationship with that other person is not a close one.

Tips for Dealing with People We Don't Like

Here are some of the most common techniques people report using:

- **Maintain a task focus:** Be sure that your conversation is focused on the job at hand, rather than the people involved. By keeping the conversation away from your thoughts and feelings, you prevent the other person from developing a closer relationship with you, and you avoid possible topics of conflict that are unrelated to the minimal interaction you must have with that person.
- **Avoid questions:** This gets the interaction with over more quickly. But don't avoid any questions that pertain to the job that needs to be done, unless you can just as easily get the necessary information some other way.
- **Use a more distant channel of communication:** Calling a person on the phone instead of talking face-to-face, or sending a memo or e-mail instead of making a phone call reduce the interaction more to information transmitting than personal contact. They are often effective at conveying the information that needs to be communicated, but may avoid unpleasant personality clashes.
- **Be polite:** By treating another person with appropriately high levels of politeness, you interact with the other person more as a role than as a human being. By making the interaction more formal and impersonal, you keep the relationship more distant, and you avoid antagonizing the other person. It is important if you use this strategy to avoid being patronizing, which would insult the other person.
- **Involve others in the interaction, when possible:** Perhaps save a conversation with this person for before or after a meeting, at a time when you know others will be around. If others are involved in the conversation, your interaction with that person is "diluted." It is

also easier to end the conversation quickly after concluding business by striking up a conversation with someone else present.

- **Do things to make the interaction go more smoothly and quickly:** Be sure that you have a clear agenda and have gathered all the necessary information before contacting the disliked person. That way, you don't drag the conversation out by doing tasks that could have been done away from that person.
- **Avoid emotional involvement:** Don't invest a lot of emotional energy in the interaction with that person. Think of the interaction as just one aspect of the job, do it, and then focus your energy on more positive things. Hatred is an emotion that grows rapidly and can consume a person if not contained; one way to contain it is to avoid feeding it by stewing over our dislike for someone.
- **Try to remain as neutral as possible:** It is best to avoid antagonizing the person you dislike because that can set the stage for retaliation on her or his part (with just cause). Besides, many of the people we dislike don't feel the same about us. They may be ambivalent toward us or even think positively of us. Treating them with hostility will only serve to make them think less of us. There is no point in making matters worse by creating an enemy where none previously existed.

Leadership Requires Mastering This Skill

Relationships with people we don't like are difficult, but for most people they are a necessary part of organizational life. Developing an ability to reduce the stress such relationships cause us and to work productively with such people will make you more relaxed, increase your effectiveness on the job, and increase chances of promotion. After all, one of the important aspects of effective leadership is the ability to work with a diverse set of people, and to garner support from all those people you work with. If you aspire to be a successful leader and manager, this is a necessary skill to master.

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