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Working with Difficult Co-Workers Together

We may have careers in common, but that does not necessarily mean that we have similar interests outside of work. Once we leave our place of employment, we all have our individual lives, filled with ups and downs. We try not to bring our personal issues to work with us every day, but for some it is easier than others. A negative co-worker can easily bring down the overall office morale, and in turn end up negatively affecting others around them. On the other hand, a generally positive co-worker can have the ability to further enrage an already difficult person. As a result, some people think that being nice to people who intentionally hurt us, or make our lives difficult, is a sign of weakness. **However, in my experience, mutual respect, and understanding are key to maintaining professional relationships, especially when our co-workers are being difficult.**

Of course, I understand those who would disagree with me. For instance, while at a previous employment, I worked with someone who didn't have the best reputation for being the "nicest" person around the office. She had a candid way of speaking that often rubbed others the wrong way at times. There were even times when she came into the office and didn't speak to us at all. For other co-workers, it was easier to "fight fire with fire," that is, speak rudely to her or ignore her, which was causing an even larger rift. Everyone was getting extremely frustrated with the fact that she was trying to control our office manager's

perception of the group and make us look like bad employees. She often made it seem like we didn't cooperate in projects, when it was her lack of communication that was causing the issues. She made it very hard to approach her regarding any issues and would speak to people in a condescending tone, which made them hesitant to ask any questions. Everyone thought that if we were able to come in with a positive attitude most mornings, then she should be able to do the same. There was so much tension in the office at the time that people were ready to start physical altercations with her.

However, we shouldn't judge a difficult co-worker's behavior unless we know what's going on outside of the workplace. After all, we all have personal issues and different ways of dealing with those issues. In the case of my difficult co-worker, I had no prior idea of what she was dealing with at home. However, she had helped me manage events around the office, and her straightforward attitude was helpful when we needed to meet a deadline. We all sat in cubicles placed right next to each other, so we could certainly hear any conversation happening within our department. I was the closest to her and, one day, started overhearing phone conversations between her and her husband. It was then that I realized that she was being verbally and physically abused. According to an article "Effects of Violence against Women" by Samantha Gluck, "If you have experienced a physical or sexual assault, you may feel many emotions — fear, confusion, anger, or even being numb and not feeling much of anything." I started to realize that while her behavior was wrong in the workplace, it was triggered by something hurtful in her personal life. According to the same article, "Other effects can include shutting people out, not wanting to do things you once enjoyed, not being able to trust others, and having low-esteem" (Gluck). All of these effects were translating into our team dynamic and

making our jobs much more difficult and less enjoyable. I started to imagine how I would feel in a similar situation and realized that the last thing I would want to do is walk into work and act like everything was okay.

Even though it is not easy for us to be sympathetic to other people's personal difficulties when we have our own problems, we need to find a way to work together. In this case, respect was so far gone at that point that I decided to break the cycle and try a different approach, to meet her halfway. While not excusing her behavior, I started going out of my way to be extremely positive, no matter what she threw my way. After all, our work goal was the same. Of course, according to an article published by the University of Guelph, "Highly cooperative and generous people can attract hatred and social punishment, especially in competitive circumstance," so when I started trying to be as helpful as I could be, I was met with hesitation on her end initially. I could see that mending the situation would take time and patience.

But in time, I saw the benefits of my "meet her halfway" approach, not only for her but also for the rest of my co-workers. First, while helping her on various projects, I noticed that she started opening up a bit more. She wouldn't go into too much detail regarding her personal life, but even our small chats seemed to be helping her overall attitude around the office. I opened up about my life as well, so she would feel more comfortable sharing. We all feel better knowing that we are not alone in a situation. Even though I was not in a similar situation, no relationship is perfect, so I shared some of the communication techniques I applied in my personal life. According to a *Career Contessa* article, "Because our work and private lives are so interconnected, fully separating them isn't always a realistic goal," (Stenger). More importantly, allowing her to open up just a bit was actually producing positive results for everyone. I didn't

solve all her personal problems by any means, but I was able to see a huge difference in the way she approached work conflicts.

We are unable to control other's actions or moods, but we can control how we allow them to affect us personally. At some point, we will deal with difficult personalities whether at work or in our personal lives, but we owe each other respect no matter the situation. There is so much negativity in this world, and our human response is to meet that with even more negativity in return. Some people think that being nice to people who intentionally hurt us, or make our lives difficult is a sign of weakness. It takes much more strength to "be the bigger person" and give that respect even when we feel we haven't received it.

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