

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Building Better Relationships at Work

The dynamics that exist in the workplace are multi-layered—on a regular, sometimes daily basis, we must interact with our leaders, our colleagues, within and between departments, and often across cultures and time zones. Given this complexity, most of us are required to frequently adjust the way we communicate and interact with people—which can be a challenging task.

Therefore, it shouldn't be surprising when we are misunderstood or step on a few toes along the way. So why are we caught off guard when we discover that we've offended someone or overstepped our boundaries? Probably because practicing effective communication requires a lot of exactly that—practice. Consider the following advice when you want to improve your relationships at work or just avoid unnecessary conflict:

- **Not all coworker relationships have an established context.** Keep in mind that you probably don't know what kind of pressures the other person is under before you press too hard for action or a response.
- **Think about the way you phrase a question or an answer before you communicate it.** Ask yourself if it's polite, if the timing is right, or if you might be better off not saying it at all.
- If you're confronted with a potentially challenging situation, **talking face-to-face is almost always more effective than using email.**
- **Realize that most people don't like to be told they're wrong.** Find a way to make some positive as well as negative points, or to phrase your comments in a way that "saves face" for your colleague.
- **Don't feed a coworker's anger.** Give yourself a day to think about it and step back from the problem in order to gain some objectivity.
- **Demonstrate that you're flexible.** Communicate that you'll be supportive no matter what decision is reached.

Be aware that it's okay to acknowledge intense feelings, and that there are ways to express your own anger and frustration in a very constructive way. For example, when you're feeling frustrated with a colleague at work, rather than keeping things inside and allowing this feeling to fester (which can only lead to further stress in the relationship), you can let the person know what's on your mind, in a positive way by simply filling in the blanks of the following sentence:

"I feel _____, when you _____ , because_____."

This way, you take responsibility for your feelings (rather than blaming someone else), and the other person gets clarity on the things that are troubling you about the relationship.

When Coworker Conflict Continues …

If there's no end in sight and you're becoming over-anxious, reluctant to go to work—or even fearful for your job, contact a professional counselor for additional support and advice on how to effectively deal with conflict.

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