

# How to Develop Empathy for Someone Who Annoys You

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When someone you work with annoys you, it's tempting to avoid the person as much as possible. But this isn't always feasible and often only makes the situation worse. You're better off cultivating some empathy. How can you do that with a colleague who rubs you the wrong way? How can you foster curiosity instead of animosity?

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## **What the Experts Say**

“We’ve all encountered someone in the workplace who irritates us,” says Annie McKee, the author of *How to Be Happy at Work* and a senior fellow at the University of Pennsylvania. “It may have to do with this person’s communication style, or maybe he engages in behaviors that you find rude – he’s always late to meetings, say.” But at a time when work is more and more team-oriented and projects often require intense collaboration, “you have to find a way to connect and build a bridge” with even the most irritating people. Cultivating compassion for these kinds of colleagues, however trying they may be, is a good place to start, according to Rich Fernandez, the CEO of the Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute. “Using empathy, you can maintain a balanced and well-calibrated approach to working with difficult people,” he says. Here are some pointers.

### **Reflect**

For starters, keep in mind that your colleague isn’t getting under your skin on purpose. It’s more likely that “they are reacting to things going on in their lives,” Fernandez says. “You need to depersonalize the situation,” he says. And look inward, McKee adds. “When someone is driving you crazy, it helps to ask yourself, What’s causing me to react this way?” Your frustration “might not be about that person at all; it might be about you,” she says. Perhaps your colleague “reminds you of someone else you don’t like.” Having “self-awareness” and a deep “understanding of our own psychological makeup” strengthens your capacity for empathy, she adds. After all, cultivating compassion – both self-compassion and compassion for others – is your primary objective.

### **Stay calm**

Next, “lean in to your emotional self-control and willpower,” McKee says. When your colleague shows up late, interrupts you, or is just being all-around obnoxious, you may feel a physiological reaction. “Recognize the clues that you’re getting triggered,” she says. “Maybe your breath quickens, or your palms start to sweat, or your temperature rises.” Giving in to these symptoms risks “amygdala hijack,” where you lose access to the rational, thinking part of your brain. Instead, take a few deep breaths to “help you regulate your stress hormones and make it less likely that you’ll engage in behavior that you won’t be proud of later,” she says. Keeping your “demeanor calm and open” puts you in a better frame of mind to conjure empathy for your colleague, Fernandez adds. “You’re not caving, and you’re not shutting down”; rather you’re staying cool and collected and “maintaining awareness of the situation.”

## **Be curious**

There are two types of empathy: *cognitive empathy*, the ability to understand another person's perspective, and *emotional empathy*, the ability to feel what someone else feels. "Both of these tend to shut down when you feel annoyed or frustrated," McKee says. But you must fight against that.

- To summon cognitive empathy for an annoying colleague, McKee recommends generating theories that might explain "why this person says what he says, thinks what he thinks, and acts the way he acts. Unearth your curiosity," she says. Ask yourself: "What motivates this person? What excites and inspires him?" Go "beyond your own worldview" and reflect on "what may be in his cultural background, education, family situation, or day-to-day pressures that's causing him to behave this way." Remember: The goal here is to "understand this person's perspective," Fernandez adds. "It doesn't mean you have to adopt it, validate it, or agree with it, but you do have to acknowledge it."
- To muster emotional empathy for that colleague, "find something in them to care about," McKee says. One way to deal with someone who irritates you is to "picture that person as a six-year-old," she adds. In other words, remember that "they're only human." The hypotheses you generated to explain your colleague's behavior could be helpful here, too, according to Fernandez: "Maybe this person is stressed or under pressure, or maybe this person is just not having a very good day." You don't have to "become a psychologist and get into their childhood," but you do have to make an effort to experience "emotional resonance." The result is often, "I get it."

## **Focus on your similarities**

Using both cognitive and emotional empathy, you must also try to "get to know the person" and deepen your "understanding of their perspective," McKee says. Rather than "focusing on your differences, look for the similarities" you share. "Start small," she advises. Perhaps you and your colleague have children the same age. Maybe your colleague lives in a neighborhood or town that you know intimately. Use those connections to strike up a conversation. If all else fails, "riff off an exchange you both seemed to find interesting in your last team meeting." Work often provides a neutral "common ground" for conversation, Fernandez says. Presumably both of you share a similar goal: "You want the organization to be successful."

## **Be kind**

The fact is, "it's easier for you to be empathetic toward people you like because you give them the benefit of the doubt," McKee says. When dealing with someone you dislike, you often assume the

worst, and that mindset shows up in your behavior. Try to short-circuit that reaction and “do or say something that’s surprising and nice,” McKee adds. Compliment the person on an idea they raised in a meeting, or offer to help out with a project. It shouldn’t be forced, however. “It has to be authentic.” Let’s say, for instance, that your colleague arrives late – yet again – to your weekly team meeting. Don’t complain or roll your eyes. And don’t be passive-aggressive with a comment like, “Nice of you to join us.” That may be your instinct, but fight it. Instead, McKee recommends, say something along the lines of, “Welcome. Get a cup of coffee before you sit down, and we’ll get you up to speed.” This type of generosity of spirit is good for you and your colleague. And remember, Fernandez says, empathy is a choice you can make in any scenario.

### **Have a (difficult) conversation**

If you still find this particular colleague challenging, you might “have to have a conversation about how you work together,” Fernandez says. But, he adds, “if you approach it through the lens of empathy, the conversation won’t become charged.” What’s more, if you’re “even-keeled and fair, your message will likely be received in a pretty good way.” For instance, don’t say, “You take up too much air time.” Instead, Fernandez suggests, say, “I’d love to figure out a way for us both to get our ideas out during the weekly team meeting.” Don’t lose sight of the fact that your colleague probably feels the same way about you. After all, McKee says, “if they drive you crazy, chances are you drive them crazy, too.”

### **Principles to Remember**

#### **Do:**

- Make a concerted effort to understand your colleague’s perspective and feelings.
- Engage in acts of kindness and compassion toward your annoying colleague.
- Learn to recognize clues that you’re having a negative emotional reaction toward your colleague. Take deep breaths and stay calm.

#### **Don’t:**

- Take your colleague’s behavior personally and lash out. Instead, look inward and ask yourself: What’s causing me to react this way?

- Focus on the differences between you and your colleague. Rather, concentrate on similarities and things you share in common.
- Shy away from having a conversation with your colleague about how you can best work together. If they drive you crazy, it's likely that you drive them crazy, too.

### **Case Study #1: Be kind and be curious about your colleague's perspective**

Gloria Larson, the president of Bentley College, says that having empathy for others is almost second nature to her. "I grew up an Air Force brat, and I was often the new kid in school," she says. "I was constantly having to get to know and like people who are very different from me."

Over her long career, her empathetic ways have been put to the test. Years ago, when she was an attorney in Boston, Gloria chaired a committee in charge of building the Massachusetts Convention Center, an \$800 million construction project along the waterfront.

Paul (not his real name), a fellow member of the board, was an incredibly difficult personality. Gloria suspected he was leaking things to the press and undermining the efforts of the other board members. Gloria, however, was determined not to let Paul get the best of her. "If someone rubs me the wrong way, I put in extra effort to get to know them and like them."

Gloria reflected on Paul's possible motivations. "But I didn't spend too much time thinking about that – I didn't want to project." So instead, she tried kindness. "I invited him out for a drink."

Throughout the conversation, Gloria remained calm and collected with an open demeanor. Her objective was to get to know Paul on a personal level but also talk about the project itself. She didn't accuse Paul of leaking; instead, she talked about their mutual goal of "figuring out a way to get this project over the finish line."

Over the course of their conversation, Gloria also learned more about Paul's perspective on the project. "He was concerned that our efforts publicly pilloried the past leadership," she says.

Paul's points were a revelation to Gloria – and perhaps even to Paul himself. "I realized I should lighten up on my public criticism of the prior leadership. And I think he realized that we didn't need to be enemies. We could work together."

## **Case Study #2: Make a special effort to learn your colleague's backstory**

Sandra Slager, chief operating officer at MindEdge, an online learning platform for companies and colleges, says that whenever she works with a challenging colleague, she reminds herself to “assume the best” about that person. “I try to remember that he’s not driving me crazy on purpose,” she says.

She also tries to be realistic. “I recognize that I don’t necessarily have to like the person in order to work with him successfully.”

A few years ago, Sandra was assigned to an editorial project with Louis (not his real name). “He was extremely nervous and stressed out,” she recalls, and that stress manifested “in his snapping at me and acting like a bully.”

Sandra knew she needed to do something. Fostering empathy for Louis was a natural first step – though she admits it was not necessarily out of the goodness of her heart. “My motivation to be empathetic was not entirely altruistic. It was about trying to solve my problem of how to work alongside him.”

She made a special effort to get to know Louis and “understand his backstory.” As it turned out, Louis told her he had been fired from his previous role for something that wasn’t his fault. She also learned that Louis was the father of teenage kids who were in the process of applying to college.

“The job was so important to him, and he was worried about his livelihood and his family,” she says. “Knowing these things, I better understood him and where his stress was coming from.”

Sandra felt more compassion for Louis and his jangled nerves. She did her best to make him feel better about her part of the task. “I told him that we both wanted this project to be successful. And that we both needed to trust each other to do our part well,” she says.

Over time, working with Louis became “less of an emotional task and more of a technical challenge,” she says. “Our styles were not aligned, but our goals were.”

The project concluded successfully. Sandra and Louis have worked on various projects together over the years. “He is still stressed out, but we have a good working relationship.”