

What to Say When Coworkers Are Angry With You



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2. You can seethe in silence.
3. You can rip away about this person to anyone who will listen.
4. You can wait for just the right moment to get your revenge.
5. You can get in the coworker's face to demonstrate you're not going to put up with that kind of behavior.
6. You can calmly and respectfully point out the problem, and ask the person for what you need.

For more than 20 years, I've been promoting options 1 and 6.

#6 has always been a tougher sell than #1. The objection usually goes something like this.

**** It doesn't matter how well I deliver my message, the person is still going to react badly.

It's a strong objection. There are a whole lot of people who aren't willing to accept any kind of negative feedback, particularly when it's true.

With that in mind, let's not spend any more time on how to deliver the perfect "I-statement." Instead, let's focus on how to receive a tough message, even if it's not delivered well.

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Your three-part response

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“Thank you for letting me know”

If you’ve screwed up, hurt someone, or acted badly; it’s possible you don’t even know you did it. A coworker has just brought it to your attention. Chances are that person was afraid to speak up. She didn’t have to, but chose to overcome the fear and talk with you anyway.

Why would she say something? Let’s identify the possibilities:

1. She doesn’t want it to happen again.
2. She wants to work it out so that the bosses won’t need to be involved.
3. She wants you to know what you’ve done so that you can make it right.
4. She wants you to be a better person and is interested in your development.
5. She wants to make you squirm and suffer. (Can we agree this is the least likely option?)

In most of these options, she’s doing you a favor by coming to you. So even if she doesn’t deliver the message perfectly, you should thank her for bringing the concern to your attention.

“I’m sorry”

You learned this one when you were a child, probably after belting your brother or sister. Your mom told you to apologize. You didn’t want to, but your mom made you do it anyway.

The apology patched things up, and you were able to start playing together again.

If doesn’t matter whether you think you did something wrong or not. It only matters that your actions created a problem for your coworker. That alone warrants a genuine apology.

“It won’t happen again”

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If you are worried it will happen again because what you did was a habit that was long in the making, you may even get away with a conditional version of “It won’t happen again.”

Try something like, “I want to change my behavior. I’m worried this is an old habit that may take some time to change. Would you be willing to help me by immediately letting me know if you see me doing it to you or anyone else again? I think a few reminders would help me make the change permanent.”

For the conditional version to work, you will need to make progress on changing the behavior.

Talk through the problems

So many conflicts at work (and at home) could be resolved by talking them through.

Yes, it takes some skill to initiate the conversation. It takes courage and a good bit of practice.

But there are also things people on the receiving end should do to make it easier for others to bring up their concerns in the first place.

Learn to use the three phrases with genuineness, and create a workplace where small problems are resolved before they get out of hand.

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