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HOW-TO

Workplace Conflict: How to Deal with Difficult People

We've all run into at least one of these four types of troublesome co-workers. Teambuilding expert Kaley Klemp explains how to handle them.

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CIO | Aug 10, 2011 8:00 AM PT



Gossiping, backstabbing, bullying and complaining co-workers will ensnare even the best employees into their unhappy world of drama and deceit. In so doing, problem employees transform otherwise efficient, benign corporate environments into tawdry scenes from *Ally McBeal*, *The Office*, *House* or any number of comedy shows poking fun at the dysfunctional American workplace.

In the real world, though, office drama isn't funny. It creates stress, drains employees of energy and hampers productivity. To address these conflicts, managers and individual co-workers need to understand the "drama type" of employees creating this toxic work environment, says Kaley Klemp, co-author of *The Drama-Free Office: A Guide to Healthy Collaboration with Your Team, Coworkers, and Boss*.

"It's important to know who's engaged in the drama so you can get at the root cause of the conflict," she says.

The four primary "drama types" as described by Klemp, who is also a leadership and teambuilding coach, include: complainers, cynics, controllers and caretakers. Knowing how to handle each of these types of people will help you ward off thorny, stressful situations that could jeopardize your career.



Actor Rain Wilson plays Dwight Schrute, the quintessential control freak, on NBC's The Office

After all, power plays end with a victor and a vanquished. Which side do you want to be on?

Here, Klemp explains the characteristics of each drama type, the kinds of conflict they create, and offers advice on how to deal with them.

Complainers

Characteristics: Beyond the obvious, complainers don't take accountability for their performance (or lack of). Instead, they blame everyone around them for not getting their work done. They also like to gossip and often fail to complete their work on time.

Conflicts: Because they point their fingers at everyone else, complainers brew ill-will among their co-workers and managers.

Tips for Handling: Klemp advises managers to listen to complainers just once. "The complainer's story is usually, 'Woe is me. I don't have enough resources to do my project. No one supports me.'" If you repeatedly listen to this same tale of woe, you risk getting sucked into their drama, she warns.

When the complainer finishes her spiel, Klemp recommends that the manager remind her that everyone is working with limited resources and to ask her what she believes her options are for getting her work done.

"The goal is to establish a clear agreement about what is going to happen by when," says Klemp. "If you let the [complainer's] story continue, the cycle will repeat itself."

Cynics

Characteristics: Cynics are sarcastic and often arrogant, says Klemp. They can also be manipulative.

Conflicts: They're just plain difficult to work with.

Tips for Handling: Klemp recommends starting any conversation with a cynic about their attitude or behavior by *complimenting* them. "Give them a sincere compliment, tell them something you admire about them," says Klemp. "They'll be much more open to your 'This isn't working for me' conversation if they know you're coming from a place of care."

Tips for Handling Cynics, Cont.

Once you've established a cordial dialog, Klemp says to be direct and dispassionate about the behavior that's bothering you. Explain your observation of the cynic's behavior and how it impacts your individual performance, or if you're a manager, the team's performance, she says.

Managers might also try to make the following point to cynics: You have good ideas and you're smart, but the way you communicate undermines the points you're trying to make. You would be more effective if you changed your tone. Here's how you can do that.

If a cordial conversation doesn't get through to the cynic, Klemp notes that managers also have the ability to deliver an ultimatum. A manager who has to give an ultimatum to a cynic might say, according to Klemp, "I want to tap into your potential. Here's how I'd like for you to change. If no change occurs, here are the consequences."

The consequences might be that the cynic's leadership role on the team ends, control over a project ends, or job loss.

Controllers

Characteristics: Not surprisingly, controllers like to be in charge. They can be micromanagers and sometimes bullies, says Klemp. They're also known for ignoring other people's boundaries and pushing for more control and responsibility. They tend to be bad at delegating, too.

Conflicts: Turf wars, power plays, stepping on other people's toes are all the domain of the controller. Because controllers micromanage others and start turf wars, employees who get swept up in these conflicts worry about their job security.

Tips for Handling: The key to handling a controlling co-worker is to understand very clearly where your and the controller's responsibilities begin and end, says Klemp. For example, you can approach your manager and say, "So-and-So has been doing work that I thought was my responsibility. Can you outline for me what my responsibilities are and what So-and-So's are so that I can be sure I am completing my work and not stepping on his toes?"

Getting a clear picture of everyone's responsibilities will allow you to enforce your boundaries with your controlling coworker. If he continues to infringe on your territory, says Klemp, you'll be able to tell him that you double checked your responsibilities with your manager and you're certain that she wants you to take care of a particular job.

Caretakers

Characteristics: Caretakers need to be liked and feel valued. To that end, they go out of their way to help others, often to the detriment of their own work.

Conflicts: They let other people down by overpromising and under-delivering.

Tips for Handling: Managers who oversee caretakers need to help them set boundaries so that they don't take on too much work. Before caretakers are allowed to take on a project or pitch in to help a co-worker, they need to run it by their manager.

"Managers need to teach caretakers that 'NO' is not a bad word," says Klemp.

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