

Building Better Relationships at Work

Workplace dynamics can be complex—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, we're often required to adjust the way we communicate and interact with people, which can be a challenging task. Therefore, it's not surprising that we are sometimes misunderstood or inadvertently step on a few toes along the way.

Building better relationships through effective communication

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 avoid unnecessary conflict:

Not all co-worker 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 respectful, if the timing is right, or if what you want to share will add value to the conversation.

Talking is almost always more effective than using email. Whether face-to-face or via video chat if working remotely, speaking to the person is most effective, especially if you're confronted with a potentially challenging situation.

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 co-worker'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.

Constructive expression

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 _____ happens, 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 co-worker conflict continues

If conflict persists after all avenues have been exhausted, particularly where harassment or discrimination is concerned, it may be necessary to involve your manager or HR. 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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Travis Millar

Clinical Content Writer

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Travis holds a Master of Social Work degree and is a registered social worker. He has worked in multiple settings, including community social work, school social work and in post-secondary education.