WORKING WITH DIFFICULT COLLEAGUES

BY SAM LEONARD BECK

It has finally happened--you landed that job of your dreams! Great hours, good pay, challenging but appropriate responsibilities and even a boss who seems to be okay. So it is time to settle in on easy street and look forward to many fulfilling work weeks ahead, right?

But wait, what about that man in the next cubicle--the one who hums under his breath all day and asks to borrow everything, even money! And those two women at the front desk - the ones who gossip about everyone and appear to spend their day causing trouble and sowing discord. And the fellow team member--the one who must have graduated from the Three Stooges University, who seems to be paired with you on every project.

Suddenly, the long work weeks ahead can appear to be a prison sentence and the amount of time you must spend with these irritating folk make looking for another position very appealing. So what are you to do? Leave a job that seems to suit you so well in every other way because of co-workers who are always getting under your skin? Or, is there a way that you can work out your differences with these people so that all of you can work productively together?

We have all experienced the frustration of dealing with difficult colleagues at work. One of the first things you must do is decide if the situation is salvageable. Generally, it is when you basically like all of the other aspects of your job except some of your co-workers. Once you have made a decision to stick it out, and have decided you are willing to work hard at improving your situation, there are some steps you can take to make your situation work.

Edie Raether, a North Carolina psychologist who conducts seminars on workplace behavior, suggests that you start with humor. It can diffuse a tense situation, giving the other person a way out that doesn't immediately put them on the defensive. So you might say to the fellow who hums in the next cubicle, "Hey, even though I could appreciate the Partridge Family back in the 70's, 'I Think I Love You' just isn't cutting it for me anymore. Can you please hum more softly?" Or "Sure, I'd love to loan you a couple of bucks but it’s my kids' money and their interest rate is 110%."

If, however, no one's smiling, then you can try "caring confrontation," says Raether. This means being supportive, non-accusatory and using "we" instead of you. "Hey, we are all in this boat together. You have a right to hum and I have a right to peace and quiet. What can we do to solve this?" Unfortunately, there may be times that you have to conclude that "we" cannot work it out.

Jon Hess, Assistant Professor of communications at the University of Missouri-Columbia, says that sometimes you just have to keep your distance, both physically and

emotionally. He suggests eliminating small talk, taking breaks at different times, not taking what irritating coworkers say to heart and keeping your personal life out of your work environment. "There are times when skirting around the issue may be better than having a huge conflict," Hess says. "Try to maintain civility without being hostile." This may mean that you greet the "Dragon Ladies" at the front desk pleasantly each morning but move quickly on your way. Don't stop to share information, don't discuss any personal issues, and if they try to draw you into their gossiping and sniping, decline politely but firmly. Be prepared to develop a thicker skin should you become the next target of their attacks, and at some point you just may have to ignore them.

Barbara Bailey Reinhold offers another strategy in her book, *Toxic Work.* Reinhold urges us to insist that goals, expectations and boundaries be clear and adhered to. "Put things in writing whenever possible, either directly or via strategic copying to certain people on your letters and memos." By clarifying roles and responsibilities in the workplace, you can lessen your anxieties over projects and procedures. You can also ensure that the "forgetful" co-worker is notified of meetings, deadlines and expectations. And always protect yourself through careful documentation.

Ross West, in *How to Be Happier in the Job You Sometimes Can't Stand*, offers several suggestions to help build positive relationships at work. First, emphasize cooperation instead of competition. Often, your new co-workers may feel threatened by your competence and knowledge, or your relationships with key players in the company. Try to diffuse this sense of competition by demonstrating your willingness to cooperate rather than compete. Also, be generous with positive comments and honest praise, since we all like to hear “great job.” We naturally feel positively about people who recognize and praise us, especially when the workplace kudos are warranted.

West also urges co-workers to learn to care about one another in order to transform the workplace from a giant impersonal machine into a place where people's shared humanity is recognized. We have all dealt with situations where we or our colleagues have had to continue to work hard despite serious illness, family crisis, personal difficulties, deaths and other hardships. Perhaps a turnaround in a bad work relationship can come from a simple expression of caring and concern to a co-worker who needs it.

Dealing with difficult colleagues at work is rarely easy. But by using some of these techniques we can often salvage an initially negative situation.