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How to collaborate with someone you don't like

It's tricky working alongside clashing personalities

BY Jess Bell / 04 Mar 2021 / Share

In the workplace, clashing with a colleague is somewhat inevitable. Different personalities and varying leadership styles mean workplace relations are not always plain sailing. Many people choose to avoid those individuals they know they don't gel with. But what about when it comes to collaboration?

Navigating a collaborative task or project with someone you don't like is tricky – especially if you're both aware of the tension before you even begin. But learning how to overcome this challenge is an invaluable skill, especially for those in leadership positions.

HRD spoke to leadership expert Tammy Tansley who said while it can be challenging, differing personalities often bring about the best results.

"We get on with people who we recognise as being similar to us, which makes for great chatter at a party or over coffee, but not necessarily great collaboration because often we're too similar," she said. "There's quite a bit of research now into how diversity of thought and approach will actually be better in the long term because you're looking at things from quite different perspectives."

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Be upfront

The first key step, Tansley said, is to be open and frank about your differences. Whether you're a financial thinker, a logical person or more of a blue-sky achiever, we all have different approaches to problem solving. Try to identify your own way of working and how that might clash with the other person's approach.

"One of the key things is to be quite adult about recognising what each party brings to the process," she said. "It is likely the different styles are going to provoke conflict because that's the nature of the beast but how can you work together in a way that amplifies the positives and how will you deal with the inevitable conflicts that will arise?"

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Examine your own bias

It's equally important to have honest conversations with yourself and examine whether your reaction has been tinted by your dislike of that person. Take a step back and look at the situation with fresh eyes, are you letting your bias get in the way of the task at hand?

"Human nature is such that we often disregard ideas or approaches from people who we don't like," Tansley said.

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Focus on the end goal

While your working styles might be different, your end goal is going to be the same. As well as identifying potential areas of conflict, Tansley said it's a good idea to make sure you're on the same page about the end goal from the very start.

Keep the first meeting opportunity light and informal to chat through your goal and set a timeline. This helps keep both parties accountable and on track. During times of conflict, that goal will serve as an anchor point to come back to and refocus your efforts.

The ability to collaborate with those you don't like is a universal skill. But if the pandemic has taught us anything, it's that innovation, collaboration and teamwork are all vital to surviving crisis.

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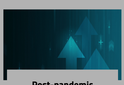
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