

Colleague Dearest

Stressed out from dealing with co-workers from hell? By knowing what difficult people want and need, you can survive an eight-hour day.

By Jim Gerard

They hold onto a project way past deadline, bad-mouth you to superiors, steal your ideas, sleep with your boss to get ahead—and these are your colleagues.

Difficult people are as ubiquitous in the workplace as fax machines, meaningless memos, and the mantra, “Thank God It’s Friday,” for which sentiment they are mainly responsi-

ble. These office malcontents not only make your job harder, but can even jeopardize your health. According to Ronna Lichtenberg, consultant and author of *Work Would Be Great If It Weren’t for the People* (Hyperion, 1998), “The major stressor about work is not the tasks we do, but the web of human interaction—what others are doing or not doing.”

That’s why we often find ourselves on the verge of collapse, singing such refrains as, “I can’t finish the report because my boss calls meetings all day,” or “Joe in marketing won’t give me the figures for my report,” or “Lorna set my report on fire.” (Don’t laugh, it could happen.)

However, rather than grouse about difficult people, you can take con-

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crete steps to neutralize and even win them over. And the way to start, says communications consultant Joy Baldrige, is to consider your own characteristics and how they influence the office atmosphere.

Baldrige says that what we label “difficult” about people is often just “different.” And what makes people different are their needs. “Some people have a need to be with people, while others work better alone,” Baldrige says. “Some require attention; others prefer to work in relative anonymity. These are core needs—what makes a person happy?”

Baldrige divides people into four personality types (see “Office Personalities,” p. 32), each with their own character traits, body language, and “praise phrases.” The person who needs recognition wants to hear, “You’re amazing,” while the helpful type will writhe in ecstasy when you tell her, “You’re indispensable.” As for the office Mussolini? “You win, sir.”

Baldrige says that once you ascertain the select vocabularies of your colleagues, you can identify their personality types. Speak to them in words that are uncomfortable to

them, and you risk offending them. “I once knew a manager who told an employee, ‘You’re terrific,’ and he skulked away with a scornful look on his face,” Baldrige says. Turns out he was a ‘precise’ type, and what he wanted to hear was, ‘You’ve done a good job.’ ”

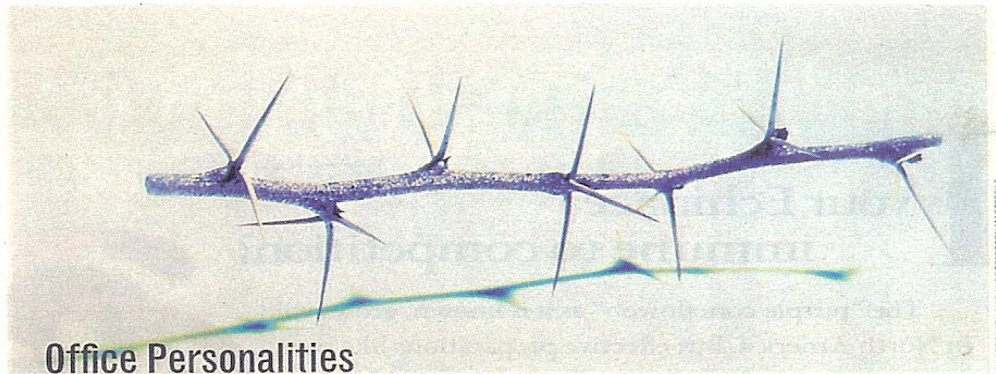
Psychological insight may help you handle most office mates, but occasionally, you’ll encounter a really difficult person—a malicious, jealous, or angry office termite who eats away at morale and deflects praise phrases like Godzilla parrying .45 slugs.

Baldrige says truly difficult people come in four categories. The sneaky, sarcastic fox is the dark side of the person who needs recognition. Ms. Fox needs attention, all right, but she’ll put you down to build herself up, and is especially adept at hurling zingers during a big meeting. To declaw the fox, take the fun out of her game. After the meeting, pull her aside and ask, “That comment sounded sarcastic. Did you mean it to be?” If she says no, you say, “you won’t make a comment like that again, will you?” Whatever your response, make sure it’s private. “If you confront her in public,” Baldrige says, “you’re dead meat.”

Suffer too many fox bites and you could end up a helpless whiner. “If someone’s whining, they’re feeling helpless and out of control,” says Baldrige, “so you have to take command. Ask what’s wrong, when did the problem start, and what can we do to fix it? Make the crisis seem rational.”

Although your goal is to stifle the whiner, you want to open up the shut-down type. These people don’t say much; they tend to be passive-aggressive, like the employee who refuses to carry out directives because he didn’t get the memo. “Set clear expectations and ask direct questions. Say, ‘I need to talk to you about the report. If you can’t do it now, when will you be prepared to discuss this?’ Then you schedule a meeting.”

Finally, there’s the bully; a mean-spirited hunter who wants to, in Baldrige’s words, “conquer your soul.” (In corporate Darwinism, this type usually bullies himself into a corner office.) The m.o. here is not to be intimidated. Brace yourself for his insensitivity and, most importantly, know what he wants: concise and logical facts that will help him achieve his purpose in life—to win.



Office Personalities

HERE ARE FOUR PERSONALITIES COMMONLY FOUND IN OFFICE PLACES. RECOGNIZE ANYONE?

The Helpful Type

Traits: They need to help people, and are loyal and devoted. *Downside:* They’re so dedicated to you, they don’t think of themselves. They give till it hurts, and when that happens, they’re bound to snap. They also tend to care so much about what people think that they worry over trifles. *Common occupations:* Customer service, social services. *Praise phrases:* “You’re so dedicated.” “You’re tremendously helpful.” “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

Body language: Expressive.

The Precise Type

Traits: Accurate, thorough. *Downside:* They’re perfectionists, which makes them rigid. They can also waste time worrying about details. *Occupations:* Accountant, engineer, builder. “Anybody with rules and regulations,” says

Joy Baldrige. “They’re rule makers, not breakers.” *Praise phrases:* “You’re right.” “That’s perfect.” *Body language:* Minimal; they’re quiet.

The Power Type

Traits: Practical, logical, sensible, focused. *Downside:* They can be perceived as being uncaring, aloof, and distant. *Occupations:* CEO or president of a company. *Praise phrases:* “You win.” “You’re the boss.” “You’re No. 1.” “You’re crushing the competition.” *Body language:* Forceful, dynamic.

The Recognition Type

Traits: Outgoing; competitive, personable. *Downside:* Can be overly aggressive, overbearing, and manipulating. *Occupations:* Sales, marketing. *Praise phrases:* “You’re wonderful.” “You’re amazing.” *Body language:* Very expressive.

“Don’t go in with drivel,” warns Baldrige. “You’ll waste his time, and in his mind, he’ll think you’re an idiot. Show him results or get out of his way.”

If you feel that office politics is beneath you, you probably won’t survive in the corporate jungle. Lichtenberg says that negotiating office politics is a critical skill that can be acquired with the following strategies:

1. Detach from the emotional content of a difficult person’s words. Depersonalize the conflict and figure out how to make her agenda dovetail with your goal.

2. Listen to your evil twin, what Lichtenberg calls “the voice of aggressive response.” It can help you defend yourself and send warning signals about office problems. If you bottle up the evil twin, the internalized stress eventually will cause you to get sick or explode. However, act on a limited number of evil

twin commands. And maintain a code of honor: no lying, for example.

3. Approach the difficult person differently. “A new approach may not always work, but it could throw them temporarily.” For example, one employee habitually responded to her bullying boss by whimpering about how he was hurting her feelings. Then one day she finally told him, “Listen, I can’t give you the results you want when you treat me this way.” He stopped his bullying.

4. Take a walk. “One of the best things you can do in a difficult situation is to walk away,” Lichtenberg advises. “It clears out the mind and makes you feel good about yourself.”

Master these principles, and at 5 p.m. you may have enough energy left to handle the difficult spouse and kids. **W**

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