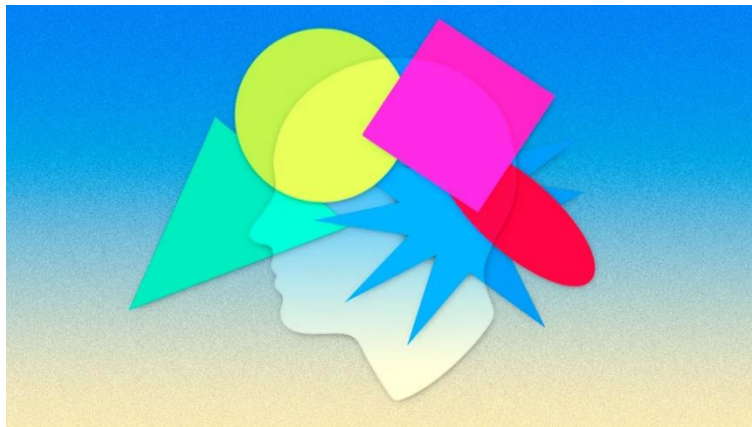


FAST COMPANY

How to work with a coworker when you have clashing personalities

Sometimes it's a matter of having different personalities—and motivations.



BY DIANA SHI

We've all had coworkers who get on our nerves. Maybe you worked with someone whose loud laugh was always interrupting your focus, or someone who was constantly taking credit for your ideas. Maybe it was harder to

quantify—perhaps you were assigned to collaborate with a new coworker and nothing seems to click between the two of you. You walked away confused about why there was underlying tension that got in the way of delivering on a project.

Some people are just annoying, of course. But the root of the issue may also be a fundamental difference in personality type. However, you don't need to feel powerless when faced with a difficult interpersonal dynamic.

“Behaviors can be learned,” says Stephan Dilchert, an associate professor of management at Baruch College's Zicklin School of Business. “Just because you have a certain personality doesn't mean you can't behave in a different way. [However,] personality is what comes naturally to you.”

Though personalities aren't fixed and can fluctuate throughout a person's life, researchers use tests, such as [the "Big 5" personality test](#), to identify which traits are strongest in certain individuals. Knowing your own results—and the different ways others might score—can help you feel better about interpersonal relationships at work.

The Big 5 test scores users on a core group of characteristics. The test defines five domains that can categorize a wide breadth of personalities: extraversion, agreeableness, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and neuroticism.

Most people find themselves fitting somewhere along the spectrum of each characteristic. But when two people fall on opposite ends of a particular characteristic, they may find it especially frustrating to work with one another. This friction reveals how each employee is [motivated by different incentives](#).

If you encounter a coworker with a dramatically contrasting personality, you don't need to try change the person; you just need to understand how they're motivated. Here are four challenging traits you may encounter in the workplace, as well as advice for how to handle them.

PEOPLE WHO SEEM SELF-SERVING

Self-serving individuals typically score lower in agreeableness—basically an individual's propensity to want others to like them. They're don't usually come off as warm or friendly, and it might seem like they think of only themselves. At an extreme, these coworkers may [exhibit toxic behavior](#), like taking credit for another teammate's work, or other narcissistic personality traits.

"Some narcissists can be absolutely destructive to your workplace," writes *Fast Company* contributor and psychology professor Art Markman [in a recent article about different types of narcissists](#). "So, it is important to be able to distinguish between people who act with confidence and those who are [actual] narcissists." By this, Markman means to look out for traits like failing to acknowledge other people's ideas (or taking credit for them) or displaying an artificial level of authority.

As a leader, try handling these staff members with **a direct approach**. If these colleagues continue to mercilessly step over others to achieve their own goals, you must make it clear their behavior needs to be reformed, or else dismiss these individuals entirely for the sake of team cohesion. To shut down these sorts of workplace toxicities it's critical to **demonstrate zero tolerance** toward abusive behaviors.

PEOPLE WHO PICK FIGHTS

Seeking out interpersonal drama should never be the goal of a workplace, says Dilchert. Even in small doses, it can unnecessarily stir the pot of a formerly well-functioning workplace and ferment tensions.

However, there is a brand of conflict that **can be good**, or at least not damaging to a company's culture. "Conflict is a reality we face in the workplace every day. It's not anything bad, per se," says Dilchert. "[However] interpersonal conflict is something we should avoid and shouldn't create. That's the big difference [between] dealing with conflict productively, versus seeking [out] conflict because it makes you feel better."

Unfortunately, coworkers who look to develop dysfunction in organizations are pursuing the less beneficial type of conflict.

If possible, leave these employees to work on solitary projects. It's also important to make **healthy dependence** on each other a part of your company's mission. Make it clear that each person's success is reliant on the team's success. Don't hold back from asking each other questions. And, importantly, bring the focus off the individual. This way, no particular member can dominate with inconsiderate behavior that works against the group.

PEOPLE WHO DON'T MAKE AN EFFORT TO BE NICE

Agreeable employees are easy to get along with and open themselves up to the rest of the team, as a professional resource, but also a friend. "[What] really describes what agreeableness is: Being somebody who likes to work with and cooperate with others, this kind of idea we're working jointly toward a common goal, [which] includes compromise," says Dilchert.

In contrast, a person who dislikes collaborative sessions and frequently shoots down ideas, may be someone you want to watch out for. Less-agreeable people do not feel as uncomfortable letting people down as a person high in agreeableness. Therefore, consider being more blunt when you're delivering feedback. Don't try to be overly pleasing yourself. They won't necessarily appreciate what you're doing, or understand why.

Though not all of these individuals are domineering, some are. In the situation you do run up against a dominating colleague, licensed therapist Melody Wilding **suggests** appealing to their results-driven nature. Make these colleagues feel like they are part of the solution—or at least show them why certain aggressive habits will not get them where they want to go.

Since these individuals are typically very task-oriented, says Wilding, articulate difficulties and the underlying consequences in concrete terms. And reframe your conversations so it's clear how their behaviors may negatively affect productivity and to achieve great results.

To handle these coworkers, link up with others on your team who are proponents of sharing ideas in a constructive way. Instead of allowing a single "goals only" colleague to bulldoze a conversation, use a "round robin" format to share ideas more collaboratively.

PEOPLE WHO ARE BAD AT DEADLINES

Conscientious people, according to the Big 5 characterizations, are those who weigh their decisions and are able to see their actions through to the end.

On the other side, those individuals who are lower on conscientiousness may not feel meeting deadlines and adhering to commitments is a major priority. They don't feel internal pressure to follow a manager's rules or organizational norms. They may come off as unreliable or struggle with sticking to plans. These are people who'd rather do things their own way than follow set standards. That's not always a bad thing, of course, but it can be annoying when they need to meet strict deadlines.

To work with these people, it's good to put stakes behind meeting deadlines and organizational standards. These sorts of employees may not see the importance of responding to their deskmate's request within a

reasonable time frame, but may view things differently if they know the team's superior will check individual results after a certain number of days. In other words, **put in place supervision** strategies. And if you need some clear documentation of workplace expectations, refer slackers to your organization's **performance-management policies**, which may finally jolt these team members into action.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diana is an assistant editor for *Fast Company's* Work Life section. Previously, she was an editor at *Vice* and an editorial assistant at *Entrepreneur*

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