

How Can I Possibly Work With These People!!!?

An article about the difficulties and importance of workplace relationships



A recent DDI survey revealed that one of the top two reasons given by people resigning from their job is their relationship with their boss. A national survey by Canadian Policy Research Networks confirmed that workplace relationships are strongly associated with perceptions of a healthy work environment. The biggest moan people have when they come home from work is usually about their uncooperative/difficult/stupid (choose your own adjective) colleagues who are not doing what they are supposed to do. Does any of this sound familiar?

Organizations are relatively simple systems. What makes them complex is that they are also intricate webs of human relationships. We need to work well with our boss, our colleagues and our subordinates to accomplish the results we want. We need to influence people to work with us and sometimes do things they don't want to do. At the same time, we need to build and maintain good working relationships for the future. These are not options, but rather basic requirements in any team-based, matrix organization.

Influencing people to do things they don't necessarily want to do and at the same time maintaining or building relationships can be tricky. Sometimes it's easier to get the job done by walking all over people, but this destroys relationships for the next time. Sometimes it's easier to give way to other's demands and maintain the relationship, but we don't achieve the outcomes we want. So how do we achieve the results we want without being passive or aggressive? How do we gain others commitment when compliance isn't enough? How do we influence others in a positive, non-manipulative way, particularly if they are being less than cooperative or difficult?

Positive influencing skills are a range of behaviors that we can employ to build trust, gain respect and gets things done with others. Most of us have a limited range of skills that are either natural or have been developed over the years. The good news is that we can identify behavioral strengths that are under-utilised; pinpoint weaknesses that can be improved; eliminate behaviors that are acting against us; and build good working relationships that

help get the job done. We can have the impact we want, instead of wondering where we went wrong or blaming other people.

The first step is to get a good picture of our current influencing behavior; behaviors we use or over-use, don't use or under-use, or simply use badly. There might also be behaviors we could employ that we are simply unaware of. We can get a realistic picture of our current behavior in a variety of ways. For example: asking others for feedback; using a feedback survey; watching ourselves in action on video; or working with a personal coach who will tell us the truth. We then need to understand what range of skills are available to us and how they work. For example: how can I be persuasive without being boring? What's the difference between being assertive and aggressive? How can I become a good listener without appearing passive? How do I bring people together around a compelling vision? How do I stand up to someone who is bullying me?

When we know what skills to develop that will have the most impact on our effectiveness; and we know how they work; we need to practice them in safe situations where it's OK to make mistakes. We need to get accurate behavioral feedback that helps us adjust and improve. In this way we can expand and strengthen our repertoire of influence behavior and find new ways of operating in situations we have always found difficult.

The final step is to be able to judge and select the appropriate skills so that our impact matches our intention. Different people and different situations require us to adapt our style. It's also helpful to know how to plan an influence strategy for important meetings where there is a lot at stake and where there is potential for conflict or resistance.

In your organization, how many people do you know who are technically very good at their job, but who create resistance or conflict because of their behavioral style? In your own case, how often do you find yourself complaining about your colleague's behavior or wondering what you could have done differently to get a better result? Just consider for a moment that there must be a better way.

Building trust, resolving conflict and influencing others are all learnable skills that are essential in today's team-based, matrix organizations. They are not a 'nice to have' but rather core requirements for anyone in a management or leadership position. In fact, the Center for Creative Leadership recently found the number one success factor for leaders to be "relationships with subordinates". As Harry S. Truman once said: "A leader is a man who has the ability to get other people to do what they don't want to do, and like it." ■

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