

WHY CONFLICT HAPPENS

BUT WHY CONFLICT? Where does it come from? Let's zero in on actual people and offenses. Like any good problem solving, specifying what is the actual "problem," and where it is coming from is the first step. So what about our example in the Introduction—the employee (we'll call her Kaylie) who felt demeaned when her boss (we'll call her Lori) seemed to dismiss and almost laugh at her idea in the meeting?

Kaylie needs to remember that the *symptoms* (Lori being dismissive) are not necessarily the *problem*. When you have an aching back, you can take some painkillers. But until you address the issue causing the pain, the symptom will probably return. So the first question to try to answer is *why* is Lori relating to Kaylie differently? Putting it another way, why is Kaylie feeling hurt by her boss, with whom she has gotten along well and who has always given her stellar reviews?

ALL OR NOTHING?

In general, Kaylie and Lori enjoy a solid working relationship. They don't socialize after hours or even have lunch together except for work functions. Lori is married with kids, a few years older than single Kaylie. But they get along. Then there's Sam, another of Lori's direct reports. He's hard for Kaylie to like—overly chatty and jokey. But he gets his work done and is never offensive or inappropriate, so she tolerates his dad jokes.

We need to remind ourselves that having problems with someone is not an “all or nothing” experience. It's not a choice of cherished confidant or nameless stranger. The quality and level of our relationships exists on a continuum, as do the challenges in those relationships. Some people may irritate us a little bit. Others we really enjoy—but only up to a point, and then we need a break from them.

We seem to be able to communicate clearly and easily with some people at work, while there are others who we don't “get,” and they don't get us. Coming to the point where we understand one another takes a lot of time and effort (and sometimes doesn't seem worth it!).

Within the context of work relationships, we may have a colleague who becomes a close friend we enjoy spending time with outside of work. We probably have coworkers we're not close to, but we work together well. Sometimes a colleague (or a supervisor or someone we supervise) rubs us the wrong way because of our significant differences in personality and communication styles. And then there are those we either actively dislike or have a past conflict that continues to cloud our relationship.

Finally (and hopefully they are rare), there may be people in the organization you don't feel safe around, or with whom you have serious differences about important things. You might choose to

minimize your contact with them. If at all possible, *these people should not be in a direct reporting relationship with you*. If this is the case, work to make changes until you can honestly say that you have a positive relationship with all of your supervisors and supervisees.

TEMPORARY “BREAKS”

But even the most positive workplace relationships can be fractured by a temporary “break” in the relationship—maybe not a complete break where you don’t relate at all, but clearly tension, mistrust, or hurt has come between you two. What causes such fractures?

Misunderstanding / Miscommunication

Probably the most common source of challenges in workplace interactions comes from simple misunderstanding and miscommunication. Mishearing (literally, not accurately hearing what the other person said) and misinterpreting the message they intended to send are the reason so much training in communication and “active listening” is foundational to workplace functioning. One of the best ways to avoid this type of miscommunication is to confirm that you understand the message sent and the practical implications (that is, what is expected of you in response). Simply summarizing what you’ve heard (“What I hear you saying is . . . and you want me to . . .”) is an excellent tool to use consistently when communicating with your coworkers and superiors. It could be Kaylie, for whatever reason, misheard or certainly misinterpreted Lori—or the other way around.

Differing Viewpoints / Perspectives / Opinions / Preferences

Some conflicts are the result of honest differences with others. These are normal, and in many cases healthy, providing a variety of viewpoints and reflecting the wide range of backgrounds and

values in our culture and the growing diversity of our workforce.

Real-life examples include:

One of your team members disagrees with you regarding the direction the marketing plan should go.

You disagree with some of your coworkers on the role of government in helping people.

Your boss comes from an older generation. His preferences for the colors, fonts, and images that he wants to use in branding the company vary widely from you and your colleagues' ideas.

Dissimilar Personality and Communication Styles

Relational challenges frequently derive from distinct personality styles and their associated communication patterns. A myriad of personality typologies have been developed that describe people's personality traits in a variety of categories. These approaches can focus on interpersonal energy (introversion/ extroversion); inner motivations that drive behaviors (the Kolbe Index, the Enneagram); ways of perceiving the world around them (the Myers Briggs Type Indicator); how they approach tasks (the DISC); and many other ways of assessing personality traits.¹

Think about the problems that can ensue when you have two department heads working together on a project. One has a strong, forceful, in-your-face style, while the other is more soft-spoken, waits to talk until there is "space" open in the conversation, and tends to avoid confrontational interactions. Without significant help—say, from a third person in the mix—they may have trouble making decisions and accomplishing tasks, simply because of who they are and what their communication styles are.

We need a diverse array of personality types in a work setting to avoid the dangers of "groupthink." At the same time, continually wrestling through these differences can be stressful and draining.