

Coworker Relations: Defuse Tension with Tact

Date/Source: Sand Creek, The Sand Paper—Winter 2010

Archived newsletters of the Personnel Peeks publication can be found on the MCHRMA site.

It's Monday morning, and you haven't even had your coffee yet. But that hasn't stopped a colleague from telling you all about his adventurous weekend. In fact, you've heard several stories in excruciating detail, and your coworker shows no signs of stopping. You just want to get to work, but how do you say so without hurting the other person's feelings or coming across as insensitive?

This situation, like many others, requires tact and diplomacy. When you work in close quarters, issues like this one are bound to arise from time to time. Whether someone's loud speakerphone conversations are driving you to distraction, or a colleague's pungent lunches make you feel like you might lose your own, sometimes you need to relay unwelcome feedback.

Thankfully, speaking with a coworker about an awkward issue doesn't have to induce panic. Here's how to approach the situation.

Evaluate the circumstances. Before saying anything to your colleague, weigh the pros and cons of speaking up. For example, how well do you know the person? If you're confident he or she will take your comments at face value, it may be wise to gently voice your concerns. If, however, you work with him or her infrequently, and the situation isn't too distracting, it may be better to let things slide.

Explain the impact. If a direct conversation is necessary, don't confront the person in a group setting. Voicing your frustration in front of others could embarrass your colleague. Instead, explain your concern when you're alone with your coworker and let the person know how the situation impacts you.

For example, if a colleague's music is proving a distraction, rather than saying, "Could you be more considerate with your music?" say, "I'm not able to concentrate with music in the background. Would it be OK to use headphones when listening to CDs?"

Reach an agreement. Don't end the conversation without coming to some sort of resolution. Solving the issue may require a compromise.

For example, if you find your coworker's music loud and annoying, he may agree to use headphones during the mornings and afternoons if you don't mind that he uses his speakers later in the day, when things have slowed down.

Remember that every situation is different and that some conversations with a coworker will be awkward no matter what your approach is. By being honest and respectful with colleagues, you'll solve issues before they fester and ensure your work relationships remain healthy.

Source: McCauley, R., Robert Half International. (n.d.). *Coworker relations: Defuse tension with tact*. Retrieved February 8, 2008, from the United States Coast Guard website: <http://www.uscg.mil>

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