

# Dealing with Difficult Coworkers



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**Keri Martinez**

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# Dealing with Difficult Coworkers

Welcome to the *Perfectionist Professional Woman* podcast. This is episode ten, “Dealing with Difficult Coworkers.”

I’m Keri Martinez. I’m a wife and mother of three children and three bonus children. I’m also a certified life coach and a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For a good portion of my life, I equated perfection with happiness and success. I thought that striving to *be* perfect and *do* things perfectly was the key to feeling happy and to being successful. I’ve since come to realize that perfection *isn’t* necessary to achieve either one of those--quite the opposite, in fact--and that has made such a difference in how I think, feel, and experience life. So if you’re a professional woman and you’d like to know how to release perfectionism so you can trade self-doubt for self-confidence, stop beating yourself up, and start enjoying your life more, then come with me. Let’s do this together.

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Hello, and welcome back. I hope you’re having an amazing day. I am pretty excited to be recording this podcast because I have made it to double digits! This is my tenth podcast episode, and I am celebrating! You can’t see me, but I am doing some chair dancing and some hand raising and waving right now.

So, let’s keep this party going by talking about...difficult coworkers! OK, so not the most fun topic, I grant you, but definitely one I think will be helpful.

And right off the bat I want to clarify a couple of things. First, I’m going to be talking about coworkers in the sense of people that are either lateral to or above you – people you don’t supervise or manage. And second, I’m not going to be addressing issues like sexual harassment, fraud, abuse, or other

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illegal activities. I'll be talking about more run-of-the-mill office challenges that aren't illegal but still get under your skin and create stress, frustration, and angst for you.

So I was inspired to tackle this subject after talking with several people recently about their encounters with difficult coworkers. Can you relate to this? Do you work with challenging colleagues? People that push your buttons or just rub you the wrong way? Maybe they constantly interrupt you or gossip about others. Maybe they don't seem to do their fair share of the workload, or maybe their work is consistently late or poor quality. Maybe they regularly miss meetings or work calls.

I have certainly had my fair share of challenging coworkers through the years. And now, it's just me working in my business and some days I still feel like I work with a challenging colleague.

So, I want to talk to you about how to handle those kinds of things – what you can do to make it easier for you, help you feel more calm and less stressed, and help you resolve conflicts without getting frustrated and angry.

I want to start by revisiting an idea I talked about in last week's episode and that is the "dichotomy of control." The "dichotomy of control" is a Stoic concept that certain things are in our control, others aren't, and we should focus our attention and energy on what we can control while letting go of the things we can't.

So, in a work context, let's start by looking at one key thing NOT in your control. And that is...surprise, surprise...your coworkers! You cannot control

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what they say or how they treat you. You can't control if they arrive at work and come to meetings on time. You can't control if they complete projects by specified deadlines or in specified formats. You can't control if they respond to emails or phone calls in a timely manner. You can't control if they interrupt others, go off on tangents, tap their pen repeatedly, or choose not to participate in meetings. You can't control if they gossip about other people or complain about company policies, their workload, or personal issues. You can't control if they return from breaks and lunch late. You can't control if they hoard office supplies or leave the microwave a mess. You can't control if they try to take credit for your work or if they regularly ask you to do their work. You can't control if they give other people preferential treatment, and you can't control if they like and respect you.

Does that sound depressing and frustrating? Well, it's actually not. It's actually great news, and I'll tell you why. Trying to control other people is exhausting! It's mentally and emotionally draining, and it doesn't work. Sometimes it *seems* like it works. Sometimes we do or say things and people do what we want, but ultimately, they have agency over their actions. So if we are spending a lot of time and energy worrying and complaining about other people's behavior, is that useful? Is it helpful? Is it really serving us?

Also consider, how much do you like it when other people try to control you? When other people tell you how you should think or what you should feel or how you should act? How much do you like it when other people do that? I have yet to talk to someone who says they love it when other people try to control them. Our personal agency is such a key part of our humanness that

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we are hardwired to resist anyone or anything that tries to limit or manipulate it.

In psychology this is called psychological reactance. According to the American Psychological Association, “when people feel coerced into a certain behavior, they will react against the coercion, often by demonstrating an increased preference for the behavior that is restrained, and may perform the behavior opposite to that desired.” In other words, when we feel like we’re being pushed to do something, our natural inclination is to do the opposite or at least do something different. So trying to control our coworkers can actually cause them to dig their heels in on the behavior we want them to change.

Something else to consider is that worrying and ruminating about what your coworkers are doing wrong is a heavy and unnecessary burden. Your brain might think it’s necessary and helpful, but I promise it is not. When you can let that go, you will feel so much freedom and relief. All the brain space and energy you’ve been devoting to your coworkers can be redirected to things that will serve you better, things that *are* actually in your control – things like your mindset, your work, your values, your skills, your actions, your problem-solving abilities, your goals, and your dreams.

Now, this is not to say you just let people walk all over you. This is not to say you can’t make requests of them to do things differently, that you can’t set boundaries, or that you can’t take steps to address inappropriate, unethical, or even illegal behavior. You can absolutely do all of those things. I just want you to do it from a clean headspace, from a place of empowerment and not a

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victim mindset. Don't tie your happiness and peace of mind to how your coworkers behave.

In the book *Getting to Yes with Yourself*, author William Ury says, "The more we need another person to satisfy our needs, the more power that individual has over us, the more dependent and needy we are likely to behave." If we need our coworkers to behave a certain way for us to feel calm or happy at work, we've essentially given them all power over our wellbeing and mental state. And what if they don't do what we want them to do? Then what? We're stuck. Unless we recognize and accept that we *can't* control them. We can only control ourselves, our thoughts, our feelings, our actions, our efforts. So first and foremost, focus on what you can control, and release the rest.

Ury also cautions against blaming others. He says blaming "escalates disputes needlessly and prevents us from resolving them. It poisons relationships and wastes valuable time and energy. Perhaps most insidiously, it undermines our power" because "we are dwelling on their power and our victimhood. We are overlooking whatever part we may have played in the conflict and are ignoring our freedom to choose how to respond." Rather than getting lost in the blame game, Ury says, "it is more useful to realize that it takes two to create the mess—and only one to begin to transform the relationship. By taking responsibility for your relationship, [your actions], you reclaim your power to change [things]."

In the book *The Success Principles*, author Jack Canfield says, "If you want to be successful, you have to take 100% responsibility for everything that you experience in your life... Most of us have been conditioned to blame something outside of ourselves for the parts of our life we don't like..." but

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“complaining is an ineffective response to an event that does not produce a better outcome.” Canfield says we should “replace complaining with making requests and taking action that will achieve [our] desired outcomes.” So second, stop blaming and complaining, and focus on what *you* can do to address the issue.

Depending on the issue, that could involve things like asking clarifying questions, making verbal or written requests, physically removing yourself from a situation, talking to a manager or supervisor, seeking support from a mentor or other colleagues, requesting a transfer, and so on. Whether or not the coworker changes their behavior, you do have options. You just need to consider how you want to show up in the situation, and what kind of employee you want to be.

One of the scenarios I heard about recently involved an employee in one department (I'll call her Jody) requesting a file of information from someone in another department (and I'll call her Lisa). When Jody received the file from Lisa, it wasn't formatted the way she wanted and was missing some of the information she needed. Jody got upset and started complaining about Lisa saying Lisa never gives her what she needs and always gets things wrong. Jody then proceeded to describe several other times Lisa had done things wrong. Now, when asked if she specified the format she wanted and all the information she needed, Jody said, “No, but she should know! Anybody would know it should be this way. It's common sense!”

Jody certainly is not alone in responding this way. I've done this myself when I received something from a coworker that didn't match my expectations in terms of quality or format or content. But let's take a look at this scenario

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through the “dichotomy of control” lens I’ve been describing. What’s not in Jody’s control here and what is? The work that Lisa did is not in Jody’s control. How Lisa prepared the file and the information she chose to include in the file is not in Jody’s control. What *is* in Jody’s control is how she responds once she gets the file from Lisa.

Jody chose to complain about Lisa and bring up other examples of Lisa’s so-called failures. Jody also complained about how this mess up was going to make her work late. The thing I found interesting in all of this was that Jody was talking to other coworkers, other people, about the problem and not Lisa. Jody needed Lisa to do something different, but she wasn’t talking to Lisa about it – at least not right away – which meant she had to wait even longer to get what she needed.

Before I talk further about how Jody could have handled this differently, I want to share another story. Several years ago I was working as a tech coach at a middle school. If you’ve never had the pleasure of visiting a middle school campus, let me just say, it can be interesting. The students range in age from 11 to 14, so they’re in varying stages of puberty, experiencing lots of hormonal, physical, and brain changes. They’re trying to assert more independence and they’re trying to sort out who they are and who they want to be in the world. Their brains are also undergoing what’s known as “synaptic pruning” which is the brain’s way of decluttering inefficient and inactive neural pathways. Needless to say, there’s a lot going on internally and externally for these kids, and because of that, you’ll see some interesting, challenging behaviors. It takes some serious skill and patience on the teacher’s part to manage a middle school classroom.



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In some classrooms, I would regularly see what I would consider chaotic, disrespectful, defiant behavior. I'd see teachers and students enmeshed in daily power struggles, and the tension and stress in these rooms was almost palpable.

But there was one teacher's classroom that was always calm and peaceful when I visited. Her room felt so different, and the students behaved so differently in her room, it was really quite remarkable! Students that were disrespectful and defiant in other classrooms were calm and on task and polite in her room. I asked her one day why she thought that was, and she told me it was because she always assumes positive intent on the part of her students. She always has the mindset that everyone is doing the best they can, and any misbehaviors aren't coming from malicious or bad intent. Because she believed that, she treated the students with dignity and respect.

That really stuck with me. Before talking to her, I hadn't really considered that assuming positive intent or automatically giving others the benefit of the doubt was an option, let alone a highly effective one. Our default brains do not do this. Our brain's default functioning is to look for potential dangers and problems, which is why it's so easy to notice what we think other people are doing wrong and then make up stories to explain the behavior. Jody's story about Lisa was that she intentionally messed up the file to get back at her. That's why Lisa didn't give her the info she needed in the format she wanted. I don't believe that's the case, but let's say for a moment that's true – that Lisa intentionally messed things up for Jody to get back at her. What is the upside to believing and focusing on that? Does that help Jody get what she needs? No. It just leaves Jody feeling frustrated, angry, self-righteous, and still without the information she wants. But what if Jody assumes

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positive intent instead? What if she gives Lisa the benefit of the doubt that Lisa *didn't* know exactly what she needed or the format she wanted? What if she assumes that Lisa *wanted* to give her what she needed but Lisa maybe overlooked something? What would be the problem with believing that?

If you're thinking Lisa needs to be held accountable for her mistakes so this doesn't keep happening, that may be true. But, please hear me on this: Jody does not need to feel upset or frustrated or angry to make that happen. She can assume positive intent with Lisa, feel calm, AND still hold her accountable. She can give Lisa the benefit of the doubt, feel peaceful and grounded, AND still talk to her about what's needed going forward.

If Jody is in the mindset of assuming positive intent, she can approach Lisa with curiosity and openness which feels so much better than frustration and blaming. She can tell Lisa she didn't get what she needed, and she can ask Lisa her thoughts on what can be done to prevent this going forward. If the issue continues, she might talk to her supervisor, but she can still do that without complaining, frustration, or anger.

In *Getting to Yes with Yourself*, William Ury says, "the cheapest concession you can make, the one that costs you the least and yields the most, is to give respect... '[R]e' as in repeat and 'spect' as in spectacles. In this sense, respect means to 'look again.' It is to see the other person with new eyes as a human being worthy of positive regard." This idea of assuming positive intent, giving the benefit of the doubt, "re-specting" others, can go a long way to resolving conflicts or overcoming challenges! In fact, that one shift can resolve the majority of coworker difficulties.

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I know it takes courage and humility to do that, to take the high road, so to speak. We can feel very justified in our resentment and frustration. It can be hard to let things go or to give others the benefit of the doubt or to think they're worthy of positive regard – especially if there's a long history of offenses and challenges. I get it. But, holding on to resentment, anger, and frustration only punishes YOU. It creates unnecessary suffering for YOU, and most of the time it doesn't serve you.

If you want to hold on to frustration, anger or resentment toward a colleague, of course that is your choice. That's your prerogative, and I'm not telling you you must let it go. I don't know what you should do, because I'm not you, living your life, having your experiences. Only you can decide what's best for you. I fully acknowledge, though, that it can be hard to let frustration, anger and resentment go, and you may not want to. But in that case, I just want you to own what you're choosing so you keep the power. Don't give your power to your coworker by blaming them for your feelings. Acknowledge and own that you're choosing to remain frustrated, angry and resentful so that you keep your power.

OK. I've shared a variety of ideas, and I want to finish by sharing one more mindset idea and a specific process for talking with a coworker about an issue or conflict. Both of these come from the book *Powerful Phrases for Dealing with Difficult People* by Renee Evenson. In the book, Evenson says conflict is a natural component of any relationship. I want to say that again. Conflict is a *natural* component of *any* relationship. Now, in some circles and cultures, conflict, tension, and differences of opinion are seen as bad. They're vilified while conformity, unity, and peace are prized as “the way.”

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Now look, I'm not advocating conflict and tension and saying we shouldn't want peace and unity. Quite the opposite. I'm just saying we don't need to be afraid of conflict and avoid it at all costs. After all, conflict is necessary for new ideas to develop. Can it run amok and create problems? Absolutely, just like a desire for unity and peace can run amok and create problems.

Evenson says conflict can be viewed as "an opportunity to grow and strengthen the relationship," and when we do that, it helps us "look for successful ways to work through the problem."

So, let's say one of your coworkers frequently comes late to meetings or sometimes doesn't show up at all. You've cleaned up your thinking about wanting to control this behavior. You acknowledge and accept that you can't control whether or not they show up on time, and when you consider how you want to respond, you decide you want to have a conversation about it. According to Evenson, "Compromise is the optimum way to resolve conflict," and here's the five-step process she shares to do that.

- Step 1: Think first. Before assuming that someone's done something to you on purpose or is out to get you, take a step back, rein in your emotions, and look at the situation from different angles. Stay focused on the issue rather than on the person.
- Step 2: Gain a Better Understanding. Talk with the other person about the situation so you can increase your understanding of the person's intent.
- Step 3: Define the Problem. When you feel you have enough information, restate the problem from your viewpoint. Then ask the other person how they view the problem. Say something like: "I see it

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this way.... How do you see it?” Before you move on to find a workable solution, everyone must agree on how the problem is defined.

- Step 4: Offer Your Best Solution. Offer your best solution and then ask if the other person agrees. If they do, move to the final step. If not, ask for other ideas. Focus on finding the best solution, try to find common ground, and be prepared for give and take.
- Step 5: Agree on the Resolution. Remember that in any conflict situation, it isn't about winning. It's about being open and flexible, respecting other people's points of view, and finding the solution that's best for all involved, even if that means backing down a little bit and not getting your way completely.

All right. That is what I've got for you this week.

Remember, people don't always get along and conflicts will happen. You will encounter difficult coworkers throughout your career. How you deal with those conflicts is what matters, though. So, knowing you can't control your coworkers, how do you want to show up? What kind of coworker, employee, and human do you want to be? Control what's in your power to control, and let go of the rest.

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training and development space and you'd like to feel more confident speaking up in meetings or delivering presentations and trainings at work, this cheat sheet will help you do that.

Have a beautiful week – ciao for now!