

QUESTION: Recently I have been having a great deal of problems with a co-worker. How do I resolve these problems now, without it getting to a point where I feel like quitting my job?

ANSWER: You did not identify any specific or type of problems. However, conflicts among co-workers are very common in the workplace. Problems and their types among employees vary depending upon the composition of each workplace. Therefore, strategies to avoid conflicts and to solve them will vary greatly.

Individual job satisfaction and performance is important to every employee and for productivity of the company, which should not be sacrificed by conflict between any workers. Many workplaces have conflict resolution strategies in place to help promote good working relationships that will reduce conflict.

It sounds like you don't deal well with conflicts and would consider removing yourself from it. Practicing conflict resolution strategies may help you strengthen your interpersonal skills – helping you handle conflicts in all areas of your life. Seek out any strategies that your company may have in place to deal with conflict in the workplace. In addition to those, here are some tips to manage workplace conflicts.

Agree to talk about the problem. Create an environment that is conducive to successful conflict resolution. Be willing to talk in a quiet private setting. Agree prior to sitting down together that the purpose of the meeting is to resolve the conflict. When you make this agreement, all parties should arrive prepared. Remember to remain non-threatening, and don't get sidetracked into an argument.

Determine what outcomes you'd like to see as a result of the discussion: A better working relationship? A better solution to the problem? Increased alternatives for successful projects? A broadened understanding of each person's needs and wants? Thoughtful solutions and outcomes are infinite if you are creative.

Express your concerns openly and honestly. Begin by allowing each party to express their point of view. The purpose of the exchange is to make sure both parties clearly understand the viewpoint of the other. Make sure each party ties their opinions to factual information, not office hearsay. This is not the time to discuss the issues; it is the time to ask questions, clarify points for better understanding and truly hear the other's viewpoint.

Identify the problem. You must agree on the problem together to begin to search for a solution. Often problems are simply misunderstandings. Clarification can end the need for conflict resolution. Try to focus on the issues, not the personalities of the participants. Don't "you" each other as in, "You always..." This kind of blaming only makes things worse. Explore and discuss potential solutions and alternatives: Try to focus on both your individual needs and wants and those of the other party. After all, if one party "wins," that means the other party "loses." People, who feel as if they have lost, are not effective coworkers. They harbor resentment and may even sabotage your project or relationship. Make sure you discuss the positive and negative possibilities of each suggestion, before you reject any suggested solutions. Build a discussion that is positive and powerful for all parties.

Agree on a plan and put the plan into effect. Remember to meet the needs of all parties. Agree on follow-up steps, as necessary, to make the plan work. Agree on what

each person will do to solve the conflict. Set clear goals and know how you will measure success, and don't forget to do what you agreed to do.

Ask for help. If these steps don't solve the conflict, talk with your supervisor about the problem. Your supervisor can't help you if he or she isn't aware of the situation.

Good luck in making peace with your coworker and learning to enjoy working together.

Questions may be sent to the Samaritan Counseling Center, 302 Cedar, Niles, MI 49120, faxed to (269) 926-6780 or emailed to pbambrick@samcounseling.org. Keesha McKee, a therapist at the Center, answered today's question.

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