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Managing Difficult Relationships

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Visualize this scenario:

Your boss calls you into her office and asks if you want to be put on a new workgroup. She tells you it is being formed to develop a new product to be offered next year. The company believes it will be the first one on the market with this product, and it is anticipated to be highly successful. She tells you there will be lots of exposure to other departments, as well as senior management, which she knows you have wanted. You're very excited and believe this is the opportunity you have been waiting for. You tell your boss you definitely want to do it, and thank her for the opportunity.

A week later you go to the first meeting for this workgroup, and the first person you see sitting at the table is Joe from another department, with whom you have not gotten along well. Your stomach churns when you think about working with Joe over the next few months and having to deal with his outbursts and unprofessional behavior. Even worse, you find out he is one of the leads on this workgroup.

You ask yourself, "How am I going to get through this?" You remember how difficult it was to work with Joe in the past, thinking that you just don't like him and the way he goes about things. You ask yourself, "What am I going to do?"

I have found for the most part everyone gets along pretty well at work, but every once in a while personalities clash, and dealing with this can be very difficult. One of the many takeaways I learned at the coaching school I attended, called iPEC (The Institute for Professional Excellence in Coaching), is we really only have five choices when dealing with difficult relationships:

1. Remain a Victim to the Relationship
2. Change the Relationship
3. Change the Relationship by Changing Your Perspective of It
4. Accept the Relationship
5. Leave the Relationship.

Below is an explanation of each one of these five choices, along with what a response may look like for the scenario described above.

1) REMAIN A VICTIM TO THE RELATIONSHIP

When you choose to remain a victim to the relationship, you feel you're stuck in this relationship, and there is nothing you can do about it. You feel powerless and hopeless, and because of this, you avoid doing anything about it. You may be angry, upset, or even sad. You feel you're not in control of the situation, and you allow your negative feelings about the relationship to fester. You may complain a lot about this other person, including to your friends and family, and you're probably not a lot of fun to be around when you're doing this. Out of the five choices listed above, remaining a victim to the relationship is actually the most common way people deal with difficult relationships.

Workgroup Member Scenario: You still show up to all meetings, participating when needed and doing what you have to do to fulfill your obligation. However, you are not enjoying being on this workgroup at all and you cannot wait for this project to end. You believe there's nothing you can do about it, and you're just stuck having to deal with Joe for the duration of the project. You may try your best to not let your feelings show, but you find it very difficult. You become very negative with lots of venting, complaining and gossiping about this situation to your co-workers. Even worse, this negativity is also brought home and affects your personal life. You remain on the workgroup because you feel you have no other choice.

2) CHANGE THE RELATIONSHIP

Choosing this one means you're actually going to do something to change the relationship. You see some value in continuing the relationship, and because of that you have decided you want to stay in it. However, you don't want the relationship as it is today, and you want to take some action to alter it so it works for you going forward.

This may mean having a conversation with the other person, bringing up what's bothering you and finding out what may be bothering him or her. It may require working out any differences with the other person, so you feel the relationship is beneficial to both of you. If the relationship is impaired because of an incident in the past, working on forgiving each other could be a possibility. It also could mean simply looking for opportunities to spend more time together to get to know each other better and to build and nurture the relationship. This choice is about taking some sort of action to try and make the relationship work.

Workgroup Member Scenario: You decide to sit down with Joe and have an open and honest conversation about your relationship. You start by

setting the tone of the conversation as amicable and non-confrontational, and you let Joe know your intention is to simply improve your working relationship. You tell him how his outbursts and the relationship in general have made you feel in the past, and you ask him how he feels about your relationship. You try to see things from his point of view, and you look for ways to change your own behavior to make this relationship work. You find opportunities that you both agree on and are willing to do to improve the relationship. Together, you both come up with a list of several immediate action steps you will both do to help build a positive relationship going forward.

3) CHANGE THE RELATIONSHIP BY CHANGING YOUR PERSPECTIVE OF IT

This one is not about taking action, but it's about changing the way you view the relationship. It could be seeing the person in a different way or from a new point of view. It could be changing your expectations regarding the relationship. Maybe it's simply accepting the person for who they are and how they show up.

Another possibility is to put yourself in the other person's shoes and see things from his or her perspective. It could also be focusing more on the positive aspects of the relationship and what you get out of the relationship that you would miss out on if you didn't have the relationship. If you change the way you think about the relationship, it could change the way you feel about the relationship, which ultimately changes how you act when you're around the other person.

Workgroup Member Scenario: You decide to change your point of view about the relationship. You realize Joe is a very emotional person, and even though you find those emotions disruptive, they can also be advantageous at times. You notice Joe has always given 110 percent and

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his heart has always been in the right place, focusing on getting the job done and doing what's right for the company. You also remember he is very good at getting people to complete things on time, and you realize this can be very beneficial to you as you are waiting for another area to get their deliverables to you so you can get your work done.

You realize even though his outbursts can be disruptive, you're in control of how you react to his outbursts. With this new perspective, you feel more in control of the situation and see some positive aspects of the relationship, so you want to participate in this workgroup. You now believe it will be a positive experience for you.

4) ACCEPT THE RELATIONSHIP

If you choose to accept the relationship, you're accepting the relationship for how it is; nothing more and nothing less, and you are good with just that. You're letting go of any negative feelings about the relationship or any possible anxiety you may have had over it. You no longer judge the relationship, but accept it for what it is and that totally works for you at this time.

***Workgroup Member Scenario:** You realize Joe is who he is and the relationship works for what it is needed for, which is to get the work done so that the project is a success. All negativity you have had about the relationship has been released. You're not anxious anymore about working with Joe over the next few months. You choose to remain on the workgroup, and accept that the relationship is going to be as it is, and that is OK.*

5) LEAVE THE RELATIONSHIP

If there is no interest in pursuing any of the options above, the only other choice is to end the relationship. Everyone behaves differently, and sometimes people's behaviors are out of alignment with our values, or personalities just don't mix. The key thing here is if the decision is to leave the relationship, any negativity around leaving the relationship is released. It's simply for the best, and you move on.

Having said that, taking this step can have significant consequences. Before deciding to end a

relationship, it is critical to look at how your life will be different after the relationship is terminated. What will you be missing out on? How will it affect others in your life? If the consequences of ending the relationship feel too big, go back and re-evaluate the other four choices to see if one of them may work out better.

***Workgroup Member Scenario:** After the meeting you think of all the pros and cons about being on this project and working with Joe. You decide the stress you will feel having to deal with him outweighs the opportunity. You talk to your boss and tell her about the struggles you have had with Joe in the past. You thank her for the opportunity to be on this project, and tell her you believe it is best for you to not be on this workgroup.*

You also offer a solution by suggesting this would be a great opportunity for a less experienced colleague on your team, who you believe has great potential and a personality that may be a better fit. You tell your boss you are willing to work with this colleague and help him with anything he needs to be successful on this project.

So that's it. We have these five choices and only these five choices. I just love the way it simplifies the decision on what to do, and also allows us to think about each option and what the outcome of that option may look like.

So the next time you're dealing with a difficult relationship, whether professionally or personally, think about these five choices. Eliminate the ones you know immediately would not be the best choice for you. For the remaining ones, think about what you would do if you chose that option and visualize the outcome. Choose the one where the outcome feels the best for you and take whatever action is necessary to make that happen. The key thing is to always remember you have a choice, so pick one and move on. ●