

Dealing with a Hostile Coworker

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When I was vice-president of a management consulting and training firm in Falls Church, Virginia, it became apparent that one coworker in particular flat out didn't like me. It didn't matter what I did or said, or whether I tried to avoid or befriend this person. Maybe I looked too much like someone from the past.

After many weeks of experiencing subtle hostility, I decided to assert myself. Rather than confront this person directly, I determined that the best strategy would be to write a note. I wrote this note:

"I acknowledge your personal dislike for me. We are both professionals and I believe we can put aside our differences for the good of the firm.

Yours truly,

Jeff Davidson."

Something must have worked, even though I was never told anything. Thereafter, I was able to have semi-pleasant exchanges with this person in the hallways.

Tough Nuts to Crack

Things don't always work this easily. Writing that note could have further fanned the flames. I felt I had to do something, however. By acknowledging that I knew I wasn't liked, and then drawing upon the fact that we were both dedicated, hard working, talented professionals, I "bonded us" in a novel way under less than ideal circumstances.

In general, I learned that appealing to a hostile party by drawing upon something you have in common or reminding the other party of his humanity, offered a decent chance of forging an effective connection.

Long before caller ID, I received several crank calls from someone responding to an advertisement I had placed in the newspaper. On the third call, I tried something bold. I said to the caller, "So this is how you spend your days? Does your mother know you're engaged in this type of behavior?" The caller promptly hung up and never called back.

Apply the Lessons in Person

I was now eager to apply this developing insight and did so the very next time I encountered resistance from a vocal detractor in a training session. I said, "I guess we all have occasions where the information we have to offer doesn't immediately square up with the perspectives of listeners, but there must be a way to leap this hurdle. What would you suggest?" With that, his demeanor visibly changed, and he replied, "Let's continue, and I'll give you my suggestion at the break." This was fine with me: I felt relieved. It was much easier to work through the issue one on one than in front of the group!