

Dealing with aggressive colleagues

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Aggression in the workplace can be difficult to handle. We offer a simple technique to help you keep calm.

I listen to the radio in the mornings and often hear John Humphreys going after another politician. When he is in full flow, you can hear the rising irritation, annoyance and aggression in his voice. Yet most interviewees manage to remain calm in the face of his verbal onslaught, responding with clear and rational replies, and getting over their point without getting flustered and remaining polite.

How do they do this, and how is this relevant to our professional lives?

The workplace is not always a place of calm and reason. Tensions caused by deadlines, targets, office politics and the sheer effort of dealing with a lot of different personalities can make it a pressure cooker at times. It's not altogether surprising that relations between colleagues sometimes get a little frazzled and tempers fray.

But what if snappishness spills over into outright hostility? An aggressive approach or verbal attack from a colleague can be extremely unsettling and upsetting. When it is directed at you, you feel personally under attack. Your natural response is to feel your hackles rise, your usual composure can desert you and you may feel embarrassed, tearful or be tempted to shout back.

Stop! Take a moment and consider a better response.

You need to plan ahead and be forearmed with a simple, foolproof technique that will allow you to stay calm if this happens to you. Think of it like a psychological trick that allows

you to keep a cool head when someone else is losing theirs.

Just as with radio Rottweiler John Humphreys, most of your colleague's aggression will be conveyed in his or her tone of voice. The trick is simply to 'bypass' the tone altogether, and focus in on what your colleague is actually saying.

It could be an angry demand or accusation: 'Why haven't you handed in that important report on time?' Think about what they are saying. Is it rational? Is it fair? Do you, in fact, have some explaining to do?

If so, simply offer a calm apology and a clear explanation of how you plan to put things right. Ignore the furious tone. Explain the circumstances and quickly follow up with the action you are going to take. If what they are saying is unfair or unreasonable, then you need to say so.

In either case, there is no need to match their anger. If you remain calm, what you say will come over far more clearly. Remember, if somebody has already lost their temper, it is almost certainly because they are under pressure themselves. Shouting back is not going to help anyone. Responding to what they are actually saying, on the other hand, will instantly reduce the emotional temperature a degree or two.

You will get over your viewpoint, avoid a bruising conflict and earn kudos among your colleagues for your grace under fire.



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