

Chapter 10: Working with Enemies

In the practice of tolerance, one's enemy is the best teacher.

— His Holiness the fourteenth Dalai Lama

GOAL FOR THIS CHAPTER:

Don't let the naysayers get you down. Learn what motivates their behavior so you can put it in perspective.

A friend of mine once told me about an experience a friend of hers had when he met the Dalai Lama. He asked him about his perceptions of China, a country that has, for decades, decimated his homeland of Tibet and whose officials once referred to him as a “wolf in monk’s clothing.” He replied that it is easy to love your friends. But China is his special friend, one that gives him the opportunity to practice tolerance and love when it’s difficult.

Work friends, work allies, work husbands/wives . . . these are the people you unconditionally trust and who add value, camaraderie, levity, and support to your day. But let’s face it—you’re never going to feel great about everyone you work with. People are going to put down your ideas, be constantly critical and negative, make you feel like an impostor, or hate you for no apparent reason. You still need to coexist with them in a way that maintains your perspective and allows you to create a work experience you love. Let’s explore the fascinating world of work enemies.

Your work enemies aren’t necessarily bad, evil people. But they’re not the people who are going to help you meet your goals or get things done. If you’re from the south, you might look at a work enemy and say, “Bless their heart.” Here are some other telltale signs of a work enemy:

- They’re naysayers (they’ll call it being the devil’s advocate) and never lack something critical to say about any project that is up for discussion.
- They bring a negative attitude with them to work every day, always looking at things with the worst possible perspective. If you see them in a good mood, it’s so rare that you become suspicious of the reasons.
- They’re the people who stand up in meetings to grandstand against anything that deviates from the way you’ve always done things before. They may raise their voice at anyone who questions them.
- They’re competitive and see things as win/lose scenarios—if someone else is successful, they fail. It could be something small or large, anything from someone else getting a staff award over them to battles over budget or organizational resources.

In some cases, they might be downright oblivious to the impact they’re having. In others, they are intentionally working against you. They could be your boss, your peer, or your subordinate— anyone in any position could be a work enemy.

In chapter 2, we looked at the difference between fault and responsibility— what other people do is not your fault, but how you react and what you contribute to the situation is your responsibility. This is never truer than with the people who drive you crazy at work. You must really internalize that they can only ruin your day if you allow them to— only you can give them that power over your experience.

PUT THEM IN PERSPECTIVE

The story you tell yourself is everything when it comes to dealing with the challenging people at work. When you don't like some-one, or they're going against you, it may be easy to tell yourself, "They're a horrible person and impossible to work with— they just want to make everything difficult," but does that story serve you? Does it get you closer to your goals? Does it help you deal with this person effectively? Probably not. What if, instead, you told your-self, "This person is a challenge to deal with, but they're probably just trying to do the best they can."

Here's the thing to really understand about your work enemies: Most of them are not being intentionally challenging with their behavior. About 50 percent of the workforce brings a generally more skeptical attitude with them to the office. It's innate—it's simply much easier for them to see the negative in things than it is to see the positive. It may seem like they are doing everything they can to throw a wrench into things or bring down the mood of the room, but if you engage them in an honest chat, you'll find that they genuinely believe they're fighting the good fight, that they are trying to do their job and do right by the organization.

When you're dealing with a naysayer, most often it's a matter of a clash in work styles— you're either very different than they are, or you're very, very similar and you're butting heads. I find that the crux of the issue tends to be how people deal with conflict. People generally fall into one of two categories: Those who get revved up in the face of a conflict and might actively seek it out, and those who avoid conflict like the plague and want to jump under the table when it's happening. Those whom you might categorize as work enemies generally have a much higher tolerance for conflict than your average bear. They love a good debate, enjoy playing devil's advocate, and do not back down in the face of a challenge. It's fun for them, like a game. Pair them with someone who is very conflict avoidant, and they will overpower them and leave them feeling undervalued and unappreciated. Pair them with someone who is equally tolerant of conflict, and that's an ongoing interpersonal conflict waiting to happen because neither of them is going to back down. Rarely have I dealt with any major interpersonal issues at work that did not involve at least one person with a high tolerance for conflict.

HAVE EMPATHY

Let's take a moment to step into their shoes. Challenging people at work are not unaware that they're perceived as challenging. In fact, some of them may joke about it and outwardly hold it up as a point of pride. Don't be fooled— that's a coping mechanism. It's a way of them putting up a wall so that you never find out that they're probably not very happy. You've learned that the contributions you make every day add up to the experience you have in whatever context you're in. Whether intentional or not, when you can only see the negative qualities in people, ideas, and projects, that doesn't lead to a very happy experience. And when people are unhappy, they unconsciously want other people around them to be unhappy. Misery loves company.

SELF-MASTERY EXERCISE

Think about when you've been unhappy at work for an extended period of time. Try to think of an example from a previous job that doesn't involve the coworker who now gives you the most trouble. What did that past experience feel like for you?

Here's an example: Perhaps you didn't think anyone listened to your ideas. You kept putting them out there over and over again, but it felt like you were talking to a wall the whole time. You watched people around you achieve successes, thinking you were always playing second fiddle to someone else's victories. You felt unvalued and unappreciated, like no matter how much work or thought you put into an idea, no one "got it." You questioned what you were doing with your life, but managed to convince

yourself that this was as good as it was going to get. And because you were unhappy at work, you took that feeling home with you. Maybe it impacted your relationships with your friends and family, to the point where you felt alone, like no one in your life understood.

Take whatever feelings this exercise conjured up and ask yourself how you would feel about the person you're having trouble with now if that was what was running through their head every day. Would you see them differently? Would it change your perspective?

GIVE THEM THEIR POWER BACK

They may act powerful, but often the naysayers of the world are experiencing a profound sense of powerlessness. Think about the example in the self-mastery exercise on the previous page— does that sound like the mindset of a powerful person? The modern workplace has a serious problem with empowerment, typically re-serving it for those at the very top. That means that a good chunk of the workforce goes through decades of their career not feeling like they have much control over anything. Some studies report that as much as 79 percent of respondents have had or are currently experiencing micromanagement, with 85 percent reporting that being micromanaged negatively impacts their morale.

You may not be able to change the reality of the workplace or help fix the micromanagement problem, but you can give someone their power back in how you choose to work with them. When something causes us stress, our natural instinct is either to avoid it or fight it. Since you're aware of that fact, you can have the presence of mind to choose a third option: Embrace it. Take a lesson from the Dalai Lama and use this as an opportunity to practice tolerance and love with the most difficult people. Be the person who listens to them, asks about their point of view, and tries to find win-win compromises so that they can experience success.

In any interactions where they're playing their usual naysayer game, keep your cool and focus on how you can flow with the situation. Don't push back with any version of "You're wrong, I dis-agree with you, and here are all the facts I have on my side." That takes the focus off the end goal and puts it on the debate. Remember, people like this are usually a bit competitive—the minute there's a contest to be won, that's going to be their priority, work relationships be damned.

Here's one way this could play out. First, you want to validate their point of view. "What I hear you saying is that you have doubts that the project will be successful because we've struggled to do things like this in the past. Do I have that right?" When they answer affirmatively, you have a chance to ask them about that.

- So, what happened with that project?
- Why do you think it failed?
- How would you have done it differently?
- What do you think we could do to make it successful this time around?

When you're doing this, it's really important for you to watch your tone and body language. You don't want to give them the impression that you're patronizing them in any way, because that just puts them back on defense. Think about when you're learning a new subject that you're really excited about, and you ask questions out of a sense of wonder and curiosity—that's what you need to bring to this situation. It will give them a chance to be in charge and teach you a thing or two from their experience.

Who knows, you may even discover some new insights along the way that wouldn't have come up if you hadn't probed.

If you can get them to a place of feeling like they have more control in the situation, that's a perfect time to attempt to align with them on the goal you're trying to achieve. A true work enemy is only an enemy when you have different goals and are competing with each other for the same resources and buy-in. You've now moved this person from someone who is competing against you for the attention of others to someone who's going to be amenable to coming along with you. Again, guide them with questions to keep them in the power position: "Are you saying that if we got the necessary resources and could expand the timeline, you'd be on board with this?" If they say no, then ask them what else they would need. Keep that back-and-forth going until they have nowhere else to go. And when they get to yes, you've won. Offer to follow up with them in a one-on-one conversation and schedule the meeting as soon as you can to confirm their buy-in. When you have the follow-up, make sure to lay out for them exactly what their concerns were from the previous chat so they know you heard all of their contributions. No matter what they say or what snide remark they make after that, just keep the rest of the meeting focused on the goal and how you can move forward, using questions every step of the way to cement their alignment with your goal. At the end of the meeting, throw out an open-ended question they can respond to: "Is there anything else I can do to help you or move this along?" Again, look for every opportunity to give them power, even though you're the one who's really in control. If you manage this, you will have offered them the professional validation they've been craving but probably haven't experienced in a very long time. They may not ever admit their appreciation, but you should have no doubt that it's there.

Be prepared: When you change the tenor of your interactions, your coworker is going to be incredibly skeptical of you, convinced that you have ulterior motives of some sort. That makes sense— when someone suddenly appears to be on your side out of nowhere, after months or years of a more adversarial relationship, it's natural to ask what's up. That skepticism isn't a reason to stop—it's a reason to keep going. In a 2017 interview with John Oliver, the Dalai Lama remarked of China's hatred of him, "I practice taking others' anger, suspicion, and distrust and give them patience, tolerance, and compassion." There are times to mirror the behaviors you're seeing in others to adapt to their needs, but this is not one of those times, because when you respond to anger with anger, you just create more anger. Responding with compassion is the only way to diffuse the situation.

What if they never respond to your efforts and just continue approaching you like the enemy? So what. Their response is not your worry. Your only concern is what you're contributing to the situation, and the standard you should hold yourself to is creating a work experience that makes you happy. When you're reaching out to others, you're acting in a positive way regardless of how they receive it. When it's hard is when it really matters. You don't do it because it's the easy thing. You do it because it's the right thing to do.

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WHEN WORK TURNS TOXIC

Most work enemies are relatively harmless. They may be cynical curmudgeons, but they're very manageable if they're kept in their proper sphere by maintaining your perspective around them. But there are a few types of work enemies that present a more complicated problem: The narcissists and the workplace bullies. The majority of people in the modern workplace have experienced one or both of these delightful types at some point in their career.

Workplace bullies

Bullies play the power game, levying repeated negative attacks, like criticism and humiliation, against their targets, with the specific intention of causing fear, distress, or harm. The ways bullies can attack their targets run the gamut from harassment and threats of violence, to emotional attacks (being shouted at, having allegations made against you), to job-related sabotages (persistent criticism of your work and effort, hints that you should quit, unreasonable tasks or impossible deadlines). The key is that this behavior has to be repeated— if someone does something one time, that does not meet the definition of bullying. But if it happens consistently over the course of months, you might have a bully on your hands.

Being bullied at work will make you question yourself constantly. Is this really happening? What have you done to deserve it? How can you just make it stop? Is it happening because you suck at your job? Are you an impostor? Every day you go into work will be a battle that will leave you feeling emotionally exhausted. In a situation like this, keep in mind that you are the only one who can empower yourself. There is a difference between being a victim of a workplace bully and being a target of one. A victim allows the situation to define them, using it as proof that there's no good in the world, that they can't trust anyone, and that there's no reason to fight. In the process, they build a wall that prevents them from really living and enjoying life to the fullest. A target, on the other hand, recognizes what's happening to them but is still able to move through the experience, open to the fact that there are good people in the world who aren't out to get them and that a positive outcome is possible.

If you're being targeted by a workplace bully, here's the very best advice I can give you: Do not go to HR and report them unless you are prepared to lose your job. Unless your organization has a formal process for handling these types of complaints where each is documented and investigated (hint: most don't), the chances of them helping you are slim to none. I say this not to insult HR professionals, most of whom are very upstanding, kind people. I say this because it's what the statistics tell me. Research shows that eight out of ten times when workplace bullying is reported, the organization will either do nothing to help the target, or overtly take the side of the bully. In fact, most of the time they know exactly what's going on and take the "that's just the way they are, learn to deal with it" approach because you're likely not the first person the bully has targeted. I saw this directly in my own dissertation work about young professionals who were targets. I interviewed eight people about their experiences of being bullied. All eight of them reported it to HR. In every case, the bully had targeted others and HR knew about it. Only one of them received help. Three of them were fired after they reported it. The rest never received the help they were looking for, most choosing to voluntarily leave their positions for greener pastures.

Which leads us to your next step: If you want the bullying to stop, it's time to start looking for a new job. You have to gauge when you're ready to take this step. Think about how often you have to work with the bully, how severe their behavior is, and how much it is impacting your stress level. It may not seem fair that you should have to be the one to leave the organization, but it is the absolute best way to empower yourself in this situation. I don't care if you've been at your job for fifteen years or fifteen minutes. It's time to dust off the resume and start sending it out, because the reality is that most position or enjoying a work experience that does not involve being the target of a highly toxic individual. I'll take door number two.

In the meantime, mitigate your stress as best you can: Find social support in the organization, get to the gym and hit a punching bag or lift some heavy weights, and get your work-life balance under control (chapter 12 will help with that!). Most of all, have the resilience to keep your head held high and maintain your perspective. You did not cause this situation, and you do not deserve it. Allow the situation to make you question yourself, and they win. Empower yourself, and there's nothing they can do to touch you. Yes, you may have to find work elsewhere, but maintaining your sense of self is the thing that matters most and will be the thing that propels you forward.

Narcissists

The word narcissist gets thrown around an awful lot, but true narcissists suffer from a very real personality disorder that gives them a grandiose sense of self-importance, devoid of all empathy or guilt. They are able to create an experience in which they are the top dog at all times, no matter how much they have to stretch the truth to do it or how many people they throw under the bus. This is where the personality disorder kicks in—how they perceive reality is skewed. They're able to convince themselves that the lies they tell are true, that every conversation is about how great they are, and that they are absolutely incapable of any missteps, living in a sort of alternative reality that constantly reinforces their elevated sense of self. The disorder develops early in life and is almost impossible to officially diagnose and treat, because that involves the narcissist seeking help for it. And in their mind, they're perfect! They don't need help with a thing.

Empathy can serve you a great deal. No matter how it may seem from the outside, narcissists are not happy people. It's truly sad to live in a world where you constantly have to work to reinforce the reality that everything you do is perfect. They may be walking around outside every day like you and I, but they are in a very real mental prison that is almost impossible to escape from.

The one thing you never want to do with a narcissist is go against them in public or take the limelight away. Nothing is more important to them than maintaining their perfect self-image or being the star of the show. If they identify you as someone who's getting in their way, they will go after you relentlessly. Remember, this is not just about career success and advancement. This is deeply personal.

Should you consider leaving your job if you work with a narcissist? Maybe. It's particularly challenging when the narcissist is either your boss (they're constantly afraid of you outshining them) or your subordinate (they have no problem getting you fired so they can take your job and rise in the ranks). If you can keep their behavior in perspective and learn to play their game, they can be a lot easier to work with than a workplace bully. However, it does take a tremendous amount of energy to do so. I've had clients hire me specifically to help them with their narcissist bosses because they didn't want to leave their jobs—they made great money and had lots of perks and didn't want to give that up. So we give it a try and I give them every trick in my toolbox to help them maintain their position. Alas, they generally throw in the towel within three to six months because they're mentally exhausted and can't bring

themselves to do it for a moment longer. The moral of the story is that you'll probably want to put some resumes out there just in case. Having options is never a bad thing.

MAKE IT A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

When someone leaves a job because of frustrations surrounding the difficult people they work with, they're looking for a fulfilling experience somewhere else. But what tends to happen is that they just repeat the same patterns in job after job after job. They start to think there's no point to it, that all organizations are the same, resigning themselves to a very "meh" professional experience until they hit retirement.

What they fail to realize is that there is one common denominator across all of their work experiences— them. It's not that they are provoking these situations with their colleagues, who were probably miserable before they ever showed up. Their mistake is that they are failing to learn and grow from the situations they're finding themselves in. Their environment will change their experience, but what they really need to do is change their perspective about whatever context they find themselves in. Remember, it's all about the stories you tell yourself in whatever situation you find yourself in. Frame your story well and that, on its own, will change your professional experience.

If you're unhappy in one job and you don't take a good long look in the mirror and ask yourself how you contributed to the situation, then chances are you're going to be unhappy in the next job you have. And the one after that. You'll keep repeating the same pat-terns until you take responsibility for the role you play.

Consider the difficult people you work with your "special friends"—they present you with an opportunity to learn to be happy regardless of your context. The only thing you can do is come in every day and contribute to the situation in a way that reflects the experience you want to create, utilizing all the tips and tricks you've learned in this book thus far. Then, if you want to move on to your next big adventure, you will bring with you the experience to know how to maintain your power and perspective in any situation.