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Coffee with Molly

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We have all had at least one! If you are very fortunate, you only had a few in your career! Difficult colleagues are a real professional obstacle. They may be your superior, your peer or your subordinate - but a difficult colleague can make your life and work challenging.

Difficult is a unique term to define in this situation. For the sake of this blog, I am defining it as a person who either intentionally or unintentionally causes your grief. It may be their attitude, their words and comments, passive aggressive issues such as undermining you or failing to do a good job or it may be easy to document issues like attendance or poor performance. A difficult colleague just makes your life harder. In most cases, for no good reason!

I have noticed that post pandemic- there seem to be more of them. Something snapped in the psyches of some folks during that time. They seem angry, frustrated and distrusting. Rather than seeing the pandemic as something you survived and life goes on- they are determined to be unhappy and to share that unhappiness!

Don't let them ruin your attitude, change your outlook or negatively impact your work! The only person we can control is ourselves. We are in charge of our life and our career. We get to choose how we respond. We do not have to allow difficult colleagues to sidetrack us! We have to remind ourselves that we have power over how we react and what we do!

So, how do we do this? Great question! Here are six methods of dealing with a difficult colleague:

One - Recognize who they are and that they have the potential to have a negative impact on you. Do not overlook the fact that they are consciously or unconsciously choosing this behavior. When you see it, recognize it. Analyze it to the best of your ability. Do they mean to be like this? What might be causing this? Understand that when someone shows you who they really are- believe it.





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Two - If a superior, take the time to ensure that you document your work. A person with authority over you often loves to play catch them doing something wrong. Do not give anyone, a superior, peer or subordinate that opportunity. Be smart. Not only document your work but document the negative interactions.

Three - Develop what I call a Teflon mentality. Teflon does not allow anything to stick. It just slides off. When you encounter this behavior, in your mind- allow it to slide right off you. Acknowledge it yourself but allow your behavior to be undisturbed. This often takes the element of joy away from a difficult person. If they cannot get to you, they get frustrated! Allow them to be frustrated.

Four - Learn to turn the tables. Replace anger or frustration with determination. Be strong, firm and resolute. Hold on to your character and your professionalism. Never repay difficulty. Be who you are and do not allow anyone to steal your peace. Keep to facts and be as specific as possible when dealing with them. Do not get personal nor allow them to be personal. Keep it all business as much as you can!

Five - Create a reputation for fairness and professionalism. Share with your staff that how you do business is as important as the business you do. Talk about ethics, communication, positive professional behavior. Exhibit it personally and keep it a topic in your meetings and training sessions. Make sure your colleagues understand that you are a strong, positive leader who refuses to become anything less.

Six - Finally, if the difficult colleague is a superior- you need to decide if you can live with it and how to maneuver tricky situations. If a peer, hold your ground and disengage when you can. If a subordinate- use the systems in place in your agency. Try a program improvement plan, a factual write up, record your meetings so you have a paper trail. Do not be afraid to be the manager or supervisor! If a toxic person hijacks your team- you may be allowing it to happen. Toxic people are extremely contagious! Cut the outbreak if you can!

There are lots of articles, Ted Talks, and books about dealing with difficult people. Take some time to do a little internet research on the topic! Do not just grin and bear it! Use your professional tools to create the team and the career you choose!

In conclusion, do a personal check up and ask yourself a really hard question.... Are you a difficult person? If yes, great news! You can change it!