

How to work with someone you don't like

Is there someone at work that you just can't get along with? Chances are you have a personality clash.

But while it might feel frustrating, you're not resigned to butting heads, or being best friends, either—there are ways to get along and get the job done. SEEK's Resident Psychologist, Sabina Read provides advice on how to do just that.

Research for SEEK shows that 77% of Kiwis say relationships with their colleagues had a huge or quite a bit of impact on their happiness at work.

Most people have had a bad experience working with someone who has a different personality to them, this can often arise from having different ways of getting things done, dealing with conflict in different ways, and communication issues.

"It's easy to wish others were more like us, believing that this would alleviate pressure points and frustrations of working with people who think and act differently to ourselves," says Sabina Read, SEEK's Resident Psychologist. More than two thirds of New Zealanders (63%) believe they work better with people whose personalities are similar to their own.

But most of us know that we can actually learn more from people with different personalities—71% of New Zealanders acknowledged this. As Read says, "working with a range of personalities can bring many benefits for individuals and organisations," it just depends on how you handle the differences.

1. **Take notice of differences and what they might mean.**

"Start by observing the differences that exist, rather than judging them, and avoid labelling others with negative or derogatory descriptions," says Read. "Instead of being loud or arrogant, is it possible that your extroverted boss needs to talk to make sense of her day?" Acceptance is key—especially if you want other people to accept how you like to work.

2. **Consider what you can learn from people with different approaches.**

"Instead of asking why someone is being tricky, explore what works for them about the way they are behaving," Read says. "Is there anything you can learn from them because of their differences to you?"

For example, you might get irritated by a co-worker's tendency to ask a lot of questions in meetings. But try to see why this could be a beneficial thing—after all, when everyone is clear on the task at hand, there's less room for error later on.

3. Ask how you can best work together to achieve your joint goals.

Sometimes you need to meet people halfway. Read recommends asking the person you're having difficulty working with what their preferred working style is, and then sharing yours with them.

For example, you could ask whether they like to have time to think about a task first, or if they prefer to jump into it and figure it out as they go. If you have a better understanding of how you both approach situations, you can support each other, which will ultimately lead to better outcomes.

4. Find ways to get your own working needs met.

If you show your co-workers that you're willing to adapt your working style to work better with them, ideally, they will do the same to you in return. Whether they do or not, Read says you should find ways to ensure your own needs are met.

"If your introversion is being challenged by the more outspoken folk in the office, arrive early to get some quiet time in your day, or plan quiet breaks throughout the day." Or, if you're an extrovert surrounded by introverts, Read says, "continue networking beyond your workmates and give your introverted colleagues time to respond to your requests."

5. Focus on the task at hand.

"When individual differences are really getting on your nerves, it can help to change your focus to the shared goals and tasks at hand rather than the different ways individuals have of approaching them."

Think of it like a sporting team, Read says. "The goal is to win, but this requires teammates in a range of roles to get the job done. When the focus is on the goal you share, differences are minimised, and at best, even celebrated."

6. Celebrate your differences.

Ultimately, it's important to accept that you can't change everyone around you, nor should you want to. "Change your belief that working with people like you would be preferable. As long as you have a united approach, underpinned by respect and the assumption that others are capable, then working with people different from ourselves can be a positive experience."

It's quite common to find yourself clashing with personalities that are different from your own. But by understanding what drives people, focusing on work or task itself, and understanding the benefits of difference, you can move beyond frustration and learn to make the most of these experiences.

Source: Independent research conducted by Nature of behalf of SEEK, interviewing 4000 Kiwis annually. Published November 2021.