

Handling “Perpetually Grumpy” Co-workers

No one chooses to work with people who are consistently dour and negative, but you CAN develop a positive, productive relationship with them. The key is to focus on your own constructive reactions, rather than their difficult behavior.

If you’ve ever had to work with someone who is always in a miserable mood and seems to walk around with a continuous black cloud over them, you know how difficult these people can be. The most common advice you will get from others is to simply disregard these people, but even when you make every effort to ignore them, it seems they have the ability to make you feel frustrated, irritated, and sometimes just plain angry.

QUICK
TIPS

No one can make you feel anything. You are responsible for your reactions to every situation.

You always have the power to choose a positive attitude when dealing with negative co-workers.

Make an effort to understand the fundamental source of negative behavior, then deal with the underlying issues directly.

But while the advice to just ignore them may not help, there are a few steps you can take to deal with these perpetually grumpy personalities:

Take Total Responsibility For Your Own Attitude

Those people who don’t get pulled down by a negative co-worker seem to understand instinctively that they have complete control over their response to any situation. This is psychiatrist Viktor Frankl called " the last of human freedoms: The ability to choose one's attitude in a given set of circumstances."

No matter how negative and annoying a co-worker may be, you CAN make a decision that your work life and job performance is more important than obsessing over a co-workers personality. Adopting this attitude will put you a big step closer to making life with this co-worker easier to bear.

Seek Common Ground

The thought of finding anything in common with a perpetually grumpy co-worker may not seem too enticing at first. But a positive connection with that person can help improve the relationship and minimize the negative feelings they provoke in you. Take the difficult person to lunch. Get to know them better, on a personal level. Make a genuine effort to find something about this person you can relate to – common ground that will strengthen your relationship.

Try Something Different

Sometimes taking a completely different approach with a person can abruptly change their typical response to you. It's probably unfair to expect you to take the first step when another person is creating the problem, but consider that you are probably in a better position to reshape the relationship.

You are more objective and aware of your own responses as well as the other person's behavior. Because of this you have an inherently greater ability to observe how the grumpy co-worker responds when you try different approaches with him or her. Watch what works, then make an effort to continue relating to that person in the same way.

Get A Fresh Perspective

If your own efforts aren't helping, ask for other people's advice. Get the perspective of a few peers, people who don't work with or know the difficult person and have no emotional stake in the outcome. Describe the situation as objectively as possible, then ask them for creative yet practical solutions. Be sure to seriously consider all ideas, no matter how off-the-wall some may seem. You never know what might work until you try.

QUICK
TIPS

Try to de-personalize conflicts by focusing on specific actions or events rather than the feelings they produce.

Put your energy into proactive, constructive action rather than reactive emotion.

Notice the positive performance aspects of difficult employees, and let them know you see their capabilities as well as their deficiencies.

Take the direct approach.

Most of us are at least a little uncomfortable with confrontational situations, but in some cases the best solution is a direct, face-to-face discussion between you and the problematic co-worker. Let him or her know that you are having problems with their attitude.

Here are a few suggestions for confronting a co-worker in a way that will motivate them to change rather than defensively dig in their heels:

- Take the approach of a teacher or coach – as being helpful rather than critical. Keep in mind that you are trying to help the person improve, not vent your own frustrations.
 - Show you care. Express your sincere concern about sharing ways the other person can improve his or her behavior or performance.
 - Choose an appropriate time for confrontation. Make sure the person isn't in a particularly emotional or angry state when you approach them.
 - Be objective and specific. For example, pull the person aside and say "I was frustrated with you today when you did such-and-such. I think we need to get together awhile and talk about how to make things better between us."
 - Show the person how they will benefit from changing the behavior or taking the actions you suggest.
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