



When Personalities Clash in the Workplace

“Don’t confuse my personality with my attitude. My personality is who I am. My attitude is who you are.”

I just read this quote recently and, although it struck me as humorous, it is not that accurate. Our personalities can take on bad attitudes when we feel crossed by someone who has a completely different and annoying personality trait. That’s when the clash usually begins.

It’s no secret that all of us have had the unpleasant experience of clashing with an opposite personality type in the workplace.

Common Clashing Examples

- One type of person desires organization, structure, and details. All projects, reports, and office décor need to have good symmetry or they become anxious. I was sitting in a staff meeting the other day with several bright business owners and one of them blurted out, “Can you straighten that picture behind you? The lack of symmetry is very distracting.”

Of course this detailed temperament has to work right next to an individual who is carefree and creative, but a bit unorganized with very little goals or action plan.

They don’t think in terms of order or symmetry, but rather are more spontaneous and impulsive. They may also wear colors that don’t match or aren’t perfectly ironed....Let the clash begin!

- Then there is that predictable worker who is black and white in their thinking and has a communication style that speaks in bullet form. This individual eats on the run, and walks fast and hard. They are very bright and cognitively put things together very quickly so they have little patience for people who “don’t get it.”



When Personalities Clash in the Workplace

Without fail, they are working alongside a co-worker who walks slow, is indecisive until they have all the facts, and speaks in a kind yet monotone fashion. This slower yet methodical personality type feels frustrated by the bottom liner guy who is frequently cutting him off mid-sentence and pushing him to move faster and stay longer.

- And still yet there is the talkative worker who, no doubt, shares more than they should about their personal life and doesn't seem to have a filter about many things. But they are good with the clients, very friendly and highly creative.



And wouldn't you know it, they have to take a long road trip or share a room at a convention with the highly private introvert who would never share their personal information and gets their emotional batteries recharged through quiet and deep thinking. That's going to be one long trip for both of them.

There are hundreds of other scenarios we find ourselves in when the different personalities are forced to mesh in the workplace environment.

Three Big Mistakes

When we try to merge two polar opposite personality types in the same office, a couple ideas could be helpful:

1. Don't always over-personalize what the other personality type says or does. I find this can frequently happen when a shy, passive, peacemaker works with a Type-A, no nonsense, have to be in control, type of individual. The stronger personality has little patience when giving instructions and gets really annoyed if they have to repeat themselves. Many times the less dominant workers actually feel the stronger ones don't like them. I find that this is rarely the case. Many driven people are just so focused on the task at hand that they don't think to ask about the success of your weekend or how you feel today.
2. Don't write off people as needy or oversensitive. Just because some need to talk about misunderstandings or share their struggles with how things are developing at the office, doesn't mean they are "high maintenance" or whiny. Some people need to be heard in detail and can't give all the facts on the fly or in bullet form.
3. Try not to judge people who are not like you. I think it's a natural tendency to wrinkle our nose and roll our eyes when people do something totally different than we would do. I once had an engineer tell me that he had to learn to be more flexible with the other trained engineers he hired. He noticed that many kept quitting his company. He said he finally realized that it was because everything had to be done his way. He gave no room for creativity and wasn't open to their new ideas. He said it finally dawned on him that there were different ways to accomplish the same goals or outcomes. When he finally got out of the way and let his staff express their own unique ideas, personalities and skill sets, they stopped quitting. Just because others do things differently, it doesn't necessarily mean it's wrong.

When Personalities Clash in the Workplace

Avoiding the Clashes

Although wrecks and clashes can't be completely avoided, there are certainly ways we can reduce them. Here are some closing ideas on how to blend rather than collide with the other personalities.

1. Stop trying to make other people like you. They say that it takes 10 years for a married couple or partners to stop trying to make their partner like them. I also read once that if you and your partner were exactly the same, one of you would be unnecessary. Observe the positive differences in your co-workers and appreciate them for who they are without trying to change them. Focus on their strengths rather than their weaknesses. You know, the very same treatment you and I would hope for from others.
2. Learn from the strengths of the other personalities. Planning ahead in detail and strong organizational skills aren't even in my DNA. Yet the secretaries and colleagues that I have worked with down through the years (not to mention my wife Jenny) are highly organized and efficient. They have taught me to think and plan ahead and not to wait to the last minute to get my projects done. The phrase I have burned under my eyelids is "lack of planning on my part doesn't constitute an emergency on their part."

3. Staff training on "Personality Differences in the Workplace." A great venue to learn principles such as:

- How each of you wants to be treated based on your personality type.
- How the staff communicates differently based on how they are wired.
- How each of you prefer to be approached when there is conflict.
- Fitting the right personality into the right position in the organization, etc.

In conclusion, work is a much more enjoyable place when we stop being threatened or offended by each other's quirky differences and start appreciating them instead!



Bill Gallagher has been counseling and working with professionals since 1980. His emphasis in the workplace is to help develop both relational skills and professional standards among administration and staff. He has worked in multiple organizational settings and of recent has spent most of his time addressing workplace issues in healthcare and city government.

Bill formed TeamWorks in 2001 to help organizations achieve their goals for establishing high morale and client satisfaction. TeamWorks currently specializes in offering one-on-one surveys and evaluations for management and staff to assess the current culture's needs and recommended trainings going forward.

In addition to conducting a variety of workshops and in-services on workplace issues, Bill mediates conflict among partnerships and staff relationships, speaks at conventions, facilitates management retreats, and offers personal consultation and counseling for staff.

Bill's strengths are in public speaking, mediation, and understanding the complexities of relational dynamics in the workplace. He lives in Medford, Oregon, with his wife Jenny, and enjoys spending time with their five children and five granddaughters.