

Why Difficult Co-Workers May Be God's Tool for Your Success

*Don't let unrealistic expectations turn your **work** into misery. God's purpose for you is a good one.*

Many believers I know desire to **work** for a **ministry** or **Christian company** someday. Their goal is to work in an environment with praise music playing, co-workers praying and Scripture verses beautifully calligraphied on wall plaques. They imagine such a workplace as holy, peaceful and devoid of that common problem: **difficult co-workers**.

I wish this were the case, but until our Lord comes back we will always have some level of difficulty relating to co-workers, whether Christian or not. I have traveled the length and breadth of this nation and most of the world, worked with Christians and non-Christians alike and believe me, there is little difference in how personnel operate under pressure.

Disagreements, arguments, conflicts, tempers, grudges and gossip often affect **churches, ministries and Christian organizations** as much as any other office. Pettiness, greed, ambition and favoritism all creep in as the enemy fires his darts and hopes to create a flame.

We would like to think that as believers, our faith allows us to work without strain or tension, but that is simply not the case. We are not perfect, so if we are going to survive our hostile work environments then we must increase our capacity to work with difficult personalities, regardless what kind of workplace in which we're placed.

Act Like a Pro I'm afraid that as Christians we are often contributing more to the **problems in office relationships** than

to their solutions. Others observe our behavior and our testimony suffers because of poor work ethics, long breaks, lengthy personal phone calls, reading the Bible on company time and so on. But the very worst thing is that we often alienate ourselves as an elite group of people and leave others feeling somehow less than us.

Though our personal preference plays into who we choose as friends, the workplace is not an appropriate setting for enforcing our own set of rules on who counts and who doesn't, on who matters and who doesn't, on who we might hang out with or totally avoid. This is so dangerous!

Work is not the setting for establishing relationships. Save that for the ladies' home fellowship or the church picnic. A workplace, especially today, includes diverse ethnic groups, cultures, religions and even sexual orientations.

You have to be able to work with people you might not relate to personally. An employee must develop a professional attitude, one in which personal opinions of any individual do not come into play.

If you allow God to enlarge your understanding of people and work relationships, you may be ready to have Him enlarge your territory. God won't give you something you are not ready to handle, but He does want to expose you to greater things and greater ways of managing life.

We need to apply the wisdom of the Bible to contemporary situations. David had that sought-after ability to work effectively with difficult people. It doesn't get much more challenging than working with someone who has an "evil spirit troubling him" (see 1 Sam. 16:14-23).

Saul was that challenge for David, yet David blessed Saul. David didn't limit himself and he surely didn't limit God! Getting his eyes off of people, being neither impressed nor depressed by them, afforded David unlimited opportunities

because he freed them up to be used by God.

Learn to work with difficult people; the very challenge you have today may be the one who tomorrow determines your promotion. Conversely, sweet Sally may be the very one who informs the boss that you walked in six seconds late one morning. Learn to remain not aloof but professional, and depend on God to reward you.

Eyes On The Prize How do you cultivate a professional attitude? Begin by keeping your eyes on your objective. Are you selling windows? Then don't walk into a customer's house and offer unsolicited advice about their décor.

Limit yourself to what you are called to do. People can be easily offended, and by speaking about areas outside your expertise—what your customer has solicited your help in—you can jeopardize your opportunity to make a sale.

Another way to maintain your professionalism is to treat everyone fairly and equally. You will naturally find some customers, co-workers and administrators easier to work with than others. But if you show favoritism by being kind and respectful to only those you like, then you are in for trouble—if not now then down the road.

Try not to take things personally, even when unhappy co-workers intend for them to hurt you. Remember that you are so much more than just an office manager, a temp worker, a high school science teacher, an accounts manager, or an advertising executive.

Work to live; don't live to work! You must learn to let go of grudges and to set aside past histories with some of your co-workers.

When you find your emotions flaring and you're tempted to react, stop yourself and remember what's really going on:

You're in the midst of a battle and the first shots have just been fired. This is the time to say a silent prayer, remember your true calling, and respond with patience and a professionalism that will astound those around you.

If you are not easily ruffled by difficult personalities, then you will increase your ability to remain cool in the heat of the battle. Your decisions will be more objective and levelheaded and you will be able to keep the work goals in mind as opposed to operating out of your personal moods and preferences.

Oil And Water It's helpful to understand some of the dynamics that contribute to interpersonal friction on the job. Like trying to mix oil and water by shaking the bottle again and again, many Christians believe that if they just act nice around difficult personalities that eventually those people will change and become nice too.

But "nice" doesn't always cut it, especially when you use it to avoid confrontation and direct communication. True kindness isn't afraid to look someone in the eye and tell him or her the truth, even if we know that this isn't what he or she wants to hear. You will garner much more respect for yourself and your beliefs if you act on kindness and honesty rather than "niceness."

Unfortunately, school doesn't teach conflict resolution; churches don't either. Often we do not learn it at home, so we step into workplaces either unwilling to confront, or—at the other extreme—unwilling to resolve conflicts. If conflict is not dealt with, it can manifest as obnoxious attitudes and discontentment.

Are you able to resolve conflicts, simply and efficiently, seeking out the common good? When confronted, can you listen to what the other person is saying or do you talk over them, debating or defending yourself?

Can you forgive the other person so that you do not pollute the environment with hostility? If not, your gifting, education, or skill may take you to a higher level and give you opportunities, but your poor character will ultimately destroy everything you work hard to accomplish.

When reconciliation seems difficult, jealousy may be the underlying combustible that fuels some of those fiery relationships. The colleague who starts rumors about you may be envious of your gifts, your education, or your looks. The manager who seeks to undermine you at the board meeting may be jealous of your relationship with the boss.

If you sense jealousy is an issue with someone, make an effort at praising their strengths or commending them for work well done. I'm not advocating flattery or false praise; if your words come across as insincere, that will only escalate the problem. This is a great opportunity to subtly minister to someone by building up his or her self-confidence.

As surprising as it may be, other believers in a hostile work environment can often pose unexpected challenges. Instead of being each other's prayer partner or ally, you instead become competitive and combative, bringing out the worst in each other. If this occurs, you must stop and realize what the enemy is about.

If the devil can create dissention and division among believers in a given workplace, then he's killed two birds with one stone. He has not only diluted the potential power that you could all experience as a united energy cell of God's children, he's also used you to undermine your witness to nonbelievers.

Learning And Growing When we learn to get along with all the various types of people in our workplace, particularly those we find challenging, there is a double benefit. Not only will our work go smoother, but we will also become better, stronger

men and women.

Most of us gravitate to people who think like we do, however, I have learned that the best teams are not comprised of people who perform the same functions; great teams require diverse gifting. It is an amazing asset when you can work with various types of people and build teamwork and fraternity eight hours a day.

God uses trials with difficult people to build our character and to increase our own store of maturity and wisdom. By attempting to avoid or ignore those who are so different from ourselves, we are often avoiding the very training that God has provided for us to advance to the next level. Be grateful when difficult personalities create challenges in your workplace and know that God is indeed equipping you for your future.

One problem that believers often grapple with when becoming more accepting and tolerant of diverse people involves the notion of judgment. Since God's Word is very clear about us not becoming like those of the world in their sinful practices, we often are tempted to think we are better than they are. Or, we fear that if we accept these people, we are endorsing or accepting their sin.

You don't have to relinquish your beliefs about sin in order to work alongside sinners. You can work with someone who's having an affair without having one yourself. Avoid self-righteousness and act with humility and grace when you encounter people whose differences make you uncomfortable.

Grow by Grace You may never receive a diploma in diplomacy, but you can learn what God wants to teach you by sticking it out and not giving up when difficult personalities add hostility to your work environment. We mustn't dismiss or ignore those who seem different from us. We should endeavor to love others within our workplace, trusting that God will shine through us

and allow us to interact with those who we find most challenging.

As you look at the assortment of personalities and temperaments in your workplace, I encourage you to thank God for each of them and ask for His guidance. The following prayer might help get you started:

“Almighty God, I am so blessed to be in my present position and I thank You for continuing to use me. I’m grateful for everyone in my office, even those I don’t particularly like or understand. Thank You for Fred in accounting. I don’t like his temper but I pray that I could learn to not fear him and grow in my ability to communicate with him.

“Thanks for Betty in the next cubicle. She talks and socializes all the time, but I know she’s just looking for connection. Give me kindness and Your words when I need to ask her to focus on work.

“I know I’m the person for this job! So I pray that I might learn how to be a better witness not just in the words I say but also the way I do business and the attitude with which I serve others around me. Thank You, Jesus! Amen.”

Read a companion devotional.

T.D. Jakes *is a pastor and the best-selling author of numerous books.*