

5 Tips for Turning Stressful Employee Relationships Around



Negative team dynamics can sour the company culture for everyone.

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Building a team can be incredibly gratifying. Not only do you get to meet talented people, but you also get to help them become their best selves. All of that depends, however, on your ability to get along with the people you've hired. If interactions with even one member become tense, grin-and-bear-it experiences, the joys of team-building evaporate. Left unaddressed, stressful employee relationships can sour the company culture for everyone.

You may be the boss, but you can't fire people simply because

they stress you out. Personalities clash, even when everyone involved has good intentions. What *can* you do? One simple, incredibly powerful thing: Change your reaction. No entrepreneur is best friends with everyone on staff, but you don't have to deal with dysfunctional work relationships, either. To turn them around, follow these five steps.

1. Cultivate compassion.

Whatever the nature of your frustrations with your employees, remember that they have lives outside of work. That irritable salesperson might have been kept awake all night by medical bills. Behind a single curt comment could be years of familial dysfunction. If a team member snaps at you unexpectedly, realize that the root issue may run much deeper. Even if you can't guess at the cause, you can be compassionate. Resist the urge to retort. Ask the employee if there's anything you can do to make his or her day better.

"Compassion doesn't excuse bad behavior," says Steve Shaheen, founder of New York City-based therapy practice June Health. "What it does is allow us to step back. We see a more complete picture of the person as a human being, with feelings and motivations that are not related to us."

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2. Find common ground.

One of the best ways to turn around a rocky relationship with an employee? Identify something you have in common. It could be a hobby like soccer, but it could also be a shared worldview. That way, if future interactions get tense, you can steer the other person back toward a safe topic and recalibrate the conversation.

Tempting though it may be, don't let office gossip become that

common ground. Remember, workers emulate their leaders. If you speak negatively about someone else on the team, you'll have more work relationships in need of repair.

3. Set (and gently enforce) boundaries.

If an employee who gets on your nerves asks if you'd like to grab a drink after work, are you obligated to go? Of course not. Stick up for yourself, but don't be brash or dishonest. The way you communicate your boundaries is key. Instead of saying, "I don't want to be around you for a moment more than I need to be" to the person who invited you out, provide a specific reason. "I'm sorry, but I don't drink" works wonders if you're truly a teetotaler. If not, something like, "No, thanks, I'm headed home to catch up on some things" is perfectly reasonable and polite.

What if an investor or another person in a position of power over you makes the request? Make your reason relevant to them, suggests Melody Wilding, a licensed social worker. If your co-founder wants to work late to pursue more leads, for instance, note that you may be less fresh for morning calls.

4. Take a break.

What if you have to work with the stressful employee directly for an extended period of time? Don't let your personal frustrations eat into your performance or demeanor. If you start to lose control, take a break. Removing yourself from the situation, even if it's just for a minute, can do wonders for your mental health.

As with your boundaries, the way you communicate your breaks is key. Put the emphasis on yourself: "I need a break" and, "I need a break from you" communicate the same need, but the first implies that the cause is internal. Better yet, use "we"

statements to create a sense of solidarity: “Why don’t we take a break?” conveys that you care about your worker’s well-being as well.

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5. Bring it back to work.

If no number of breaks or chats about shared interests seems to make a difference, you and your employees still have a financial incentive to get along. “Your success really largely depends on your ability to have a productive relationship with your colleagues,” notes HR expert Lynn Taylor in an interview with CNN. Even if the worker has no interest in your mental health, he won’t want to jeopardize his own success. And your business’s success likely depends on having a variety of viewpoints on your roster.

Try subtly bringing stressful conversations back to work. Ask the person to weigh in on a strategy you’re not sure about. Chances are high that she’ll be more than happy to share her opinion. If the conversation continues to slide, be more direct: “I’d love to keep chatting, but we need to focus on this project” is a fair but firm way to handle it.

Neither firing nor ignoring workers who get under your skin is a smart move. Rather than let bad blood solidify, try to turn things around. You might be surprised at just how much employee relationships grow when you make an effort.

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