

Difficult Conversations

How to Work with Someone Who Isn't a Team Player

by Carolyn O'Hara

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Summary. Do you work with someone who isn't a team player? This isn't simply frustrating; it can affect your entire group's performance. There are a few things you can do to try to encourage the person to think more about the team. Start by approaching your colleague with... [more](#)

Do you work with someone who isn't a team player? Maybe they're overly focused on completing and promoting their own work. Or they don't chip in when everyone else is scrambling to meet a deadline or pulling a presentation together. This isn't simply frustrating; it can affect your entire group's performance. How do you work with this person in a way that doesn't make you resentful? And how can you encourage them to think more about the team?

What the Experts Say

When a team member procrastinates or displays a bad attitude, there's a real risk of social contagion that drags down the morale and productivity of those around them. "We all pick up on subtle cues from other people, and that affects our behaviors and actions," says Susan David, founder of the Harvard/McLean Institute of Coaching and author of *Emotional Agility*. "That leads to poor team efficiency, lower levels of commitment, and less focus on the shared goal." Ignoring the issue often ends up only making it more acute. "There are a lot of negative consequences to somebody not carrying his or her load on a team," says Allan Cohen, a professor of management at Babson College and author of *Influence Without Authority*. "The longer it goes on, the worse it gets in terms of how frustrated other members of the group will become." Here's how to work with a coworker who isn't a team player.

Don't jump to conclusions

It's human nature to make assumptions about the reasons behind someone else's behavior, even when we lack real evidence, says Cohen. "That's how our brains work," he explains. But this shortcut doesn't always lead us to the right conclusions. Instead of assuming that someone is just a slacker or lacks commitment, "do a little exploration first," he says. The roots of the person's behavior may surprise you. It could be that they are dealing with a stressful situation at home that is leading to distraction at the office. Or they may be feeling work pressures that you are unaware of. Or they're not sure how to best contribute. You want to avoid writing the person off or "concocting an explanation for their behavior, especially if it involves attributing bad motives to them," Cohen says.

Start a dialogue

Approach your colleague with friendly questions, rather than accusations. Even if you aren't in a leadership position on the team, "consider this a good opportunity to practice your leadership skills," says David. You might ask: "What else is going

on for you right now?” or “What’s motivating you?” This should give you enough insight to see the experience from their perspective.

Invite them in

More serious problems arise on a team when members shun someone who isn’t carrying their weight. So take the lead and make sure you’re not ostracizing the person. Consider taking your colleague out to coffee or lunch just to get to know them better, and bring along a couple of colleagues to promote cohesion. More interactions will promote friendlier group relations. “It’s really hard to resent somebody you understand better,” says Cohen.

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Revisit the team’s mission

Sometimes a team member who is being uncooperative may actually help identify underlying issues by serving as a kind of ‘canary in the coal mine’ indicating that something is off with the group. It may be that your team’s approach isn’t working, says Cohen, or that your mission isn’t clear enough. Use this opportunity to have a conversation with the entire team about what the group’s shared vision should be and the best methods for getting there. That clarity should help boost everyone’s sense of purpose and productivity. “A lot of people go into team meetings focused only on what’s been done and what hasn’t been done,” says David. “Teams who bypassed the earlier questions about mission often tend to get into the weeds of, ‘She didn’t do this,’ and, ‘He didn’t do that,’ which leads to frustration and resentment.”

Clarify team members’ roles

Once you’ve had the bigger picture conversation about mission, it’s a good time to clarify roles. “Don’t assume everybody knows exactly what their contribution is supposed to be,” says Cohen. It

could be that the non-team player has little or no understanding of what they're meant to do. Without putting your colleague on the spot, you can suss out whether there is any ambiguity or confusion, and then help clarify duties and deadlines so that they have a better understanding of what's expected of them.

Identify new opportunities to motivate

A team member may not only distance themselves because they're confused; they could find the work they've been assigned to be pointless and boring. They may want more responsibility or an opportunity to grow their skills. If that appears to be the case, "think about whether there is a more suitable role for this person on the team," says David. Look for ways to reassign them, even informally, to better showcase their skill sets or offer them new ways to learn. "Everyone likes to develop and project a sense of competence, or of mastery," says David. You'll often find that commitment to the team grows as a person's confidence in their role increases. "People are highly motivated by not wanting to let their teammates down," says Cohen. "Get them into the game, and they'll go to great lengths to perform better for the team."

Principles to Remember:

Do:

- Inquire about your colleague's interests, priorities, and motivations to get a better sense of their perspective and the causes of their behavior.
- Use this opportunity to revisit the team's purpose and goals.
- Look for opportunities to better utilize the uncooperative team member's specific skill set.

Don't:

- Develop an explanation for the colleague's behavior without talking to them first.
- Ostracize the team member in question. Promote more interactions to create better group cohesion.
- Assume everyone knows what they're supposed to be working on. Clarify team members' roles so that people know what is

expected of them.

Case Study #1: Address the root of the problem

From the outset, Wendy Patrick could see that her committee colleague wasn't much of a team player. The two were members of a community outreach project for homeless and at-risk women, but this individual "showed up late, left early, and hardly interacted with the other team members," Wendy says. His behavior was off-putting and bad for morale on what was essentially a volunteer project.

Rather than write the person off as a bad egg, Wendy decided to investigate the roots of his bad attitude. "I started the conversation by thanking him for his participation, and asking how I and others might enhance his experience working with the committee," she says. She discovered, to her surprise, that he had no idea what he was expected to be doing and, moreover, was afraid to ask. "He was in over his head," she says, "and we mistook his ignorance for indifference."

Wendy walked him through the work of the group and how he might contribute, and he quickly identified a role that best suited his interests and experience. "Overnight, he became a happy, friendly team player," she says.

Case Study #2: Set new challenges

When Dave Bloom was the weekend news anchor and managing editor of an ABC affiliate news program in West Palm Beach, he would gather all the members of the newsroom for a meeting to review that evening's show. The floor manager, who handled technical specs for each broadcast, simply didn't contribute at these daily recap sessions. "He just failed to offer any input" and could be standoff-ish with other colleagues, Dave says. Over time, his poor attitude and lack of effort "began to affect both the floor crew and the on-air talent."

So Dave decided to reverse roles to show his colleague the importance of contributing to the team effort. "Instead of leading the recap sessions myself, I placed him in charge of the meetings for one week," he says. The idea was to show his colleague that the

team only worked well if everyone was chipping in. As the session leader, the floor manager had to offer his thoughts on the broadcast, ask for input from others, and take on the responsibility of daily problem solving. The gambit worked. “He thrived with the added responsibility,” says Dave. Clearly, his colleague had needed a challenge to help motivate him and show him the importance of team work. “It was a dramatic change after that,” says Dave. The colleague began making excellent contributions, and was so effective that Dave “gave him the role of leading the meeting after the Saturday 11PM newscast every week from there on out.”

Carolyn O'Hara is a writer and editor based in New York City. She's worked at The Week, PBS NewsHour, and Foreign Policy. Follow her on Twitter at @carolynohara1.

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