



# Book Don't Bring It to Work

## Breaking the Family Patterns that Limit Success

Sylvia LaFair  
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### Recommendation

It's your first day on your new job, and you're meeting your new colleagues. You shake hands, make eye contact and offer a pleasant smile. But for some reason, you instinctively don't like one or two people; they make you uncomfortable. How is it possible to judge people whose names you don't even know? Therapist and relationship expert Sylvia LaFair believes that the seeds of workplace conflict are rooted in your family background. She posits that the behaviors modeled in your childhood and your relationship with your family members create subliminal expectations that you subconsciously project onto others, including strangers. LaFair suggests that understanding your upbringing is the linchpin to avoiding and resolving workplace conflict. The author offers profound, detailed insight into the psychological dynamics that govern interpersonal relationships. Recognizing your family patterns is just the first step, though; the real work lies in your willingness to change your behavior. Though LaFair's approach may not resonate with everyone, *BooksInShort* recommends her book to managers and employees who wish to avoid perpetuating destructive cycles of workplace conflict.

### Take-Aways

- Workplace conflict is common; one study says employees spend one-quarter of their time, or two hours a day, engaged in petty disagreements with co-workers.
- Job stress often triggers destructive emotional responses based on old, familial patterns.
- You can't change your family upbringing, but you can change your behavior.
- Typical human resources and management interventions are often ineffective in dealing with employee conflict.
- Be alert for 13 behavioral patterns in the workplace, including the "super-achiever, rebel, procrastinator, clown" and "persecutor."
- Firms can ease clashes by promoting balance, self-expression, stress reduction and better communication.
- "Sankofa Mapping" charts your family history to help identify patterns in your work life.
- Transformation starts with mentally re-creating an adverse situation at work and role-playing to invent better alternatives for handling it.
- Create a six-week plan to target behavioral change. Enlist trusted confidants to help.
- Frank, productive communication ultimately depends on your ability to listen.

### Summary

#### A Common Affliction

There's no doubt that conflict in the workplace is a major issue. Studies show that executives devote a significant portion of their work week to dealing with personality conflicts among staffers. At the same time, workers are spending more money treating stress-related health issues linked to dysfunctional work environments. The American Management Association found that employees spend one-quarter of their time, about two hours a day, engaged in petty disagreements with co-workers.

"Nobody's behavior exists independently of his or her interpersonal relationships."

Difficult economic conditions, technology that depersonalizes communication and the influx of a new generation of workers with different attitudes all contribute to increased negativity and hostility in the workplace. But ultimately, job conflicts trace back to the behavioral patterns and psychological influences that people experience in their upbringing. Even in relatively healthy families, members take on certain "invisible roles," such as the "good girl," the "smart one" or the "lazy one." People attain

a certain level of comfort with their familial roles and carry those patterns – particularly the destructive ones – into the workplace. For example, former Tyco CEO Dennis Koslowski, haunted by his impoverished upbringing, stole millions from his company to chase a life of excess, only to end up penniless – just like in his childhood.

“Conflict runs rampant in the workplace because of our natural and universal tendency to bring our families with us to work.”

While Koslowski’s case is extreme, behavioral patterns from your youth can emerge even when you’re at work. Intense emotional reactions in crisis situations have their roots in family history and a primordial survival instinct. Since workplaces typically discourage emotional expression, employees often stifle their thoughts and feelings. Organizations can create environments in which destructive patterns have little breathing room by following these steps:

- **Strive for balance** – Rules are necessary, but an overly regimented environment stifles creativity and discourages spontaneity. On the other hand, too much flexibility leads to chaos and anxiety. Allow your employees the freedom to ask questions and make decisions, while holding them accountable for their actions.
- **Promote expression** – Employees often hesitate to express displeasure or disappointment for fear of being labeled agitators or weaklings. Consequently, workers suppress their issues and go on pretending that everything is fine. Conversely, some workplaces remain embroiled in drama constantly, so work takes a backseat to tumult and commotion. Foster honest expression without condemnation to prevent issues from festering.
- **Reduce stress** – Emotional patterns often surface in times of extraordinary anxiety. Difficult economic conditions, layoffs and high unemployment rates can trigger irritability and irrationality. Organizations can help workers deal with uncertainty by offering stress management and wellness and exercise programs. Employees can also benefit from lunch hour lectures on handling financial challenges.
- **Structure communication** – Help promote open exchanges by educating employees about emotional patterns and their ramifications. To avoid crisis situations, hold periodic workshops to teach communication and feedback skills.

## A Failure to Communicate

Companies typically follow a predictable path in attempting to resolve workplace conflict: Bosses and human resources (HR) representatives provide counseling and coaching in a “performance improvement plan” for those involved. But if the negative behavior doesn’t change, three different outcomes are possible: managers sweep the issue under the rug, the problematic person resurfaces in a different department or the firm terminates the employee. Unfortunately, this widely practiced form of intervention largely fails because it targets superficial symptoms instead of the “systemic patterns” at the base of the conflict. The HR approach also falls short because it’s designed to rehabilitate one or two “troublemakers.” While this tactic may achieve short-term results, problems will inevitably resurface, setting off another wasteful cycle of HR intervention.

“Your ability to discern patterns shortens the amount of time you have to spend resolving conflicts and helps limit the depth of upset that occurs.”

Despite management’s best intentions, people cannot solve workplace conflict without addressing the issues that cause their destructive behavior in the first place. Organizations must acknowledge the connection between ingrained familial patterns and workplace interactions. Then they must structure an environment that fosters sincere and open communication. The truth can be painful, yet it’s the only viable path to a solution.

## “Thirteen Destructive Patterns”

Most people can identify with one or more of the 13 most common and damaging behavioral patterns. Recognizing your tendencies toward these patterns is a necessary prerequisite to bringing about change in yourself and in your workplace:

1. **“Super-achiever”** – Success is the only thing that matters to these individuals, who allow nothing to stand in its way. They have an inflated opinion of themselves and little regard for their colleagues. Super-achievers create a hostile work environment because they trust no one and use intimidation to establish their superiority.
2. **“Rebel”** – These individuals love a good fight. They rail against authority and have little tolerance for policy and regulations. Rebels act as if they want change, but they are uninformed about the issues and causes they undertake. They enjoy bringing colleagues into the fray, but they typically face bleak long-term career prospects.
3. **“Procrastinator”** – They start out with the best of intentions, but fail to deliver on their promises. They enthusiastically embrace assignments, yet regularly blow deadlines and act as if they are blameless. Procrastinators are insecure and riddled with anxiety over whether they’ve made the right choices.
4. **“Clown”** – While having a good sense of humor is not a bad quality, office clowns take it to the extreme. They frequently tell off-color, offensive jokes and use wisecracking to safeguard their vulnerabilities. Clowns bring value in that they can diffuse tense situations, but their behavior more often creates communication gaps.
5. **“Persecutor”** – Like schoolyard bullies, persecutors use intimidation and harassment to exert their dominance. They can be verbally abusive or quietly critical in attacking the self-esteem of others. Persecuting bosses contribute to an antagonistic setting that destroys individuals and sabotages any notion of teamwork.
6. **“Victim”** – Insecure and fearful, victims are pessimists who love to complain and tend to avoid situations where someone might question their competency. They wallow in negativity, fail to recognize opportunities for change and fear scrutiny from their bosses.
7. **“Rescuer”** – These individuals focus on helping others to avoid examining their own inadequacies. Rescuers thrive on receiving praise for playing the hero. They gravitate toward any cause, yet they often become hostile when others don’t need their help anymore.
8. **“Drama queen or king”** – Nothing invigorates these people more than a good crisis. Drama queens and kings live for emotional upheaval, and their theatrics can be entertaining. They are typically intelligent and resourceful, but their desire for attention often compromises their efficiency.
9. **“Martyr”** – If anything needs doing, the martyr is at your service. He or she strives to be the go-to person in the office, the one who listens to everyone’s problems and finds solutions. Martyrs act as if recognition is not important to them, but they never miss an opportunity to complain about being underpaid and underappreciated.
10. **“Pleaser”** – Conflict and controversy are the pleaser’s worst enemies. Pleasers want desperately to fit in and are deathly afraid of disapproval. They are most comfortable working for micromanaging bosses who tell them exactly what to do. Pleasers rarely take a strong stand or voice an opinion.
11. **“Avoider”** – When the going gets tough, avoiders sidestep. They prefer not to deal with problems, even when they are responsible for them. Avoiders typically have subdued personalities, but they will engage in passive-aggressive behavior if they are unhappy.

12. **“Denier”** – These individuals live in a fantasy world where there are no problems. They ignore the truth because it would force them to engage in painful introspection. Deniers are most concerned with how things look on the outside.
13. **“Splitter”** – Splitters can be particularly damaging in the workplace because they fly under the radar and enjoy playing both ends against the middle. Driven by insecurity and powerlessness, splitters will take you into their confidence and then surreptitiously pit you against your colleagues.

## Taking Inventory

Change happens only when you look back at your family experiences and identify the patterns that define you. One useful tool is “Sankofa Mapping,” a chart, or “genogram,” that illustrates the relationships in your family. *Sankofa* means “heal the past to free the present” in the language of Ghana. Sankofa Mapping is much more than a genealogical tool; it’s an in-depth exploration of your immediate and extended family members, pertaining to their health, finances, religious beliefs, work experiences and interpersonal relationships. To start your own Sankofa Map, speak with as many relatives as you can and try to get detailed information. You are likely to uncover both positive and negative patterns that directly affect your life. For instance, you may discover a history of alcoholism or substance abuse and learn how your family dealt with the problem. Or you may find out why you are driven to succeed or procrastinate or avoid confrontation.

“Other things may change us, but we start and end with family.” (author Anthony Brandt)

Armed with an awareness of your patterns, you can begin the transformational process. Don’t expect to become a totally new person. Instead, learn to make better use of your positive behaviors while minimizing your negative tendencies. A productive exercise called the “Pattern Encounter Process” (or “PEPtalk”) enables you to alter an ineffective pattern. To use it, re-create an adverse, stressful work situation. Have a friend play the role of the other individual in your scenario. While the scene plays out, focus on your thoughts and words, and feel the change inside you. It may not happen at first, but with repetition you will feel empowered and understand how you can respond effectively in a particular circumstance.

## Moving Forward

After practicing your PEPtalk, outline a plan of action to change your patterns. Follow it for six weeks, since experts agree that is how long it takes for new behaviors to become habitual. For example, if you’re a martyr taking on extra work to please your boss and colleagues, plan in your first week to leave the office on time and to have a chat with your manager about the changes you’re seeking. You will eventually discover that dialogue with your peers is less emotionally charged and more productive. You will also find that it’s easier to speak the truth, although you must be diplomatic. Frank, productive communication ultimately depends on your ability to listen empathetically to your co-workers instead of exclusively focusing on your own agenda. As you seek transformation at work, keep the following principles in mind:

- **Use words carefully** – Avoid statements that echo your pattern.
- **Trust your instinct** – When something doesn’t feel right, find a quiet moment to connect to a past situation.
- **“Pattern interrupt”** – Change how and when you speak in work situations to disconnect from your usual behavior.
- **Probe** – Ask questions that provoke insight, and speak in “truth sentences” that deal in facts, not emotions.
- **Find a “pattern-busting buddy”** – Rely on a trusted friend who will act as your reality-checker.
- **Remind yourself** – Use totems like pictures or songs as cues in your transformation, and keep a journal on your progress.
- **Set an example** – Share your journey for change with others.

## About the Author

Sylvia Lafair, a former family therapist, is president of Creative Energy Options, Inc., a consulting firm that addresses conflict resolution and leadership issues.

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