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CAREER COUCH

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The Office Skirmish: How to Avoid Round 2

Q. You recently had a big argument with a co-worker. Though you managed to end it, you still feel uncomfortable around this person. Should you try to discuss it or pretend it never happened?

A. If, after a few days, your co-worker is acting as if nothing occurred, it's probably best to ignore the situation, says Damon Beyer, co-author of "The Right Fight" and a management consultant with Booz & Company in Houston. "If it is clear, however, that your colleague is still upset and feeling animosity toward you, it's best to raise the issue," he says.

Focus on your work together and on continuing to meet established time frames and deadlines, says Susan F. Benjamin, a communications strategist in Shepherdstown, W.Va., and author of "Perfect Phrases for Dealing With Difficult Situations at Work."

Keep the conversation civil and respectful, Ms. Benjamin says. "You could say: 'I know we had a difficult situation arise last week, but for me it's over and I really want to focus on this project. Does that work for you too?'" After that, your conversations should establish or re-establish your respective responsibilities so you can move forward, she says.

If you want to discuss what happened, try to put yourself in the other person's shoes, Mr. Beyer advises. You know why you were angry or defensive but may not understand the other side.

"You aren't saying you were wrong; you're saying 'How could we have avoided the conflict?'" he observes. "It's important to have a genuine interest in trying to understand what caused it to happen."

Q. How can you address a conflict that isn't a big blowup, but is more insidious and lasts a long time?

A. If someone's behavior is annoying but doesn't affect your work, confronting it directly might not be worth it,

says Lisa Maxwell, a mediator with the National Conflict Resolution Center in San Diego who trains managers on how to handle workplace disputes.

"You're not going to like everyone you work with; you only need a working relationship that is respectful," she says. But if someone's behavior is undercutting your performance and directly affecting your ability to get your job done, you should address it.

Mr. Beyer suggests that you get some time alone with the person and broach the topic gently, saying, for example, "In the last couple of months I feel like our relationship has changed." Then list the behavior you've noticed — things like missing deadlines or avoiding you.

"Someone who is passive-aggressive will maintain that nothing is wrong, so be assertive and insist you believe things have changed and want to know what you can do to be a more effective collaborator," Mr. Beyer says.

Listen closely, and co-workers may offer clues as to what's bothering them. If they feel they aren't getting enough credit for joint projects, for instance, they aren't likely to voice it explicitly. But they might say, "You seem to be doing well

for yourself because of our work together," Mr. Beyer says. This gives you insight into what's driving them, he says, and lets you address problems more directly.

Q. What if, despite your best efforts at reconciliation, your estranged colleague says he or she can't work with you?

A. If you have no choice but to work with this person, you might have to ask your manager to intervene. Don't badmouth your colleague — just state the facts about the situation, says Leslie Seppinni, a doctor of psychology, management consultant and crisis intervention specialist in Beverly Hills, Calif.

"Don't say that you can't work with this person," Dr. Seppinni says. "Let your manager know you want the project to be successful and ask if they would be willing to try and help you and

After an argument, try to put yourself in your foe's shoes, a consultant suggests.



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this colleague work together."

Q. If someone at the office is yelling at you, what should you do?

A. Yelling is inappropriate and highly unprofessional, but it happens on occasion. When it does, don't stare at the person, don't argue and don't walk away (unless you fear that the person may become physically abusive), Mr. Beyer says. Try to let personal accusations roll off your back, because a screaming person is not rational: "Avoid being confrontational back to them; just restate what you hear them saying."

"If they say, 'This project is garbage,' you say: 'I understand you think this project is terrible. I hear what you're saying! It takes a tremendous amount of energy for someone to stay that angry, especially if the other person is calm and listening,'" he said.

But if the behavior continues, your manager or H.R. department may need to become involved.

Q. Can workplace conflict be healthy?

A. Yes. It offers an opportunity to strengthen your relationship with a co-worker. Both of you gain a chance to explain what was upsetting — and to fix it, Mr. Beyer says. "You're making this investment of time and energy, so the other person will feel you must want to work with them," he says. "You're not just giving up." □

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