

Times are edgy, workmates are more belligerent — so how do we learn to get along?

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A 2021 survey revealed that 89 percent of people in the workplace deal with conflict at work.

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Monday morning meetings aren't what they used to be, according to one Wall Street analyst.

"One person makes a proposal about how we should package a deal, and the next one to speak cancels him," said Tom (last name withheld), a 40-year-old Hoboken, NJ, resident, who said that while some team members don't understand how things work, others have "weird" biases or are simply argumentative. "It can make the job frustrating," he said. "We're supposed to be working together, not against each other. We're here to do deals."

Conflicts at work, whether we are in physical proximity or not, are nothing new, but some researchers are finding that they may be happening more often than usual. A survey conducted in 2021 found that 89% of employees from a diverse range of industries reported experiencing conflict at work and that they spend an average of 3.5 hours per week dealing with it.

"We're living through an ongoing pandemic, racial injustice, political divisiveness, severe weather events and ongoing war," she said, pointing out that this doesn't even take into account our personal experiences with loss and uncertainty. "We can't minimize the impact these collective and individual events have played on our mental and emotional health which then impacts how we show up with those around us."

Charles Dorison, a researcher at Northwestern University, agrees. "More than ever before, the outside world seeps into the workplace, often leading to tension at work," he said. "Polarization is a feature of daily work life, whether we like it or not."

These experts are not alone in his observation. "We believe we're living in a world right now of noise and pressure and people feeling polarization everywhere they go," said Katie McCleary, co-author (with Jennifer Edwards) of "Bridge the Gap: Breakthrough Communication Tools to Transform Work Relationships From Challenging to Collaborative" (McGraw Hill).



Workplaces have become increasingly more polarized.

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While it might be nice if the world stood still so everyone could collectively catch their breath, it's not likely to happen. So instead, it's up to our leaders — and ultimately, ourselves — to find the tools we need to create work relationships where, in spite of external circumstances, we can work alongside one another more harmoniously.

We asked experts how we should deal with conflicting co-workers or clients in order to build good working relationships.

Start with empathy

Think about the co-worker you're in conflict with as a 5-year-old-child, innocent and ignorant. "Don't let the adult they are showing up as stand in the way of who they are as a human being," said Joel Garfinkle, executive coach, and author of "Difficult Conversations: Practical Tactics for Crucial Communication." "Find something to talk about that's not the subject of your difficulty."

It's worth noting that you may have to make a special effort for this if you're working remotely.

Let them empty their cup first

When there's conflict, let the other person speak first. Find out why they believe so strongly in the other direction.

"I have to hold myself to being open and to truly hearing them without getting triggered, without getting defensive and without wanting to jump in," said McCleary. "When they're done speaking, we thank them for sharing. If they've shared something that has really crossed our values or even thrashed our values, we have language for that, and it's respectful language, and it says, 'I really hear what's at stake for you. My values are this, and so I don't agree with you. But it was a wonderful conversation to hear what matters most to you, and here's something that matters to me.' "



At Work offers advice on how to deal with conflict in the workplace.

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Be curious

When you enter a conversation, “lead with a question, one that genuinely wants to understand the seat that they sit in, the pair of glasses they are wearing,” said Edwards. “Our research has shown that in the end, people really want to work together. They want to collaborate. They want to be happy.”

But, she adds, when things get tight, we often jump to a judgment, which means we will never understand another person.

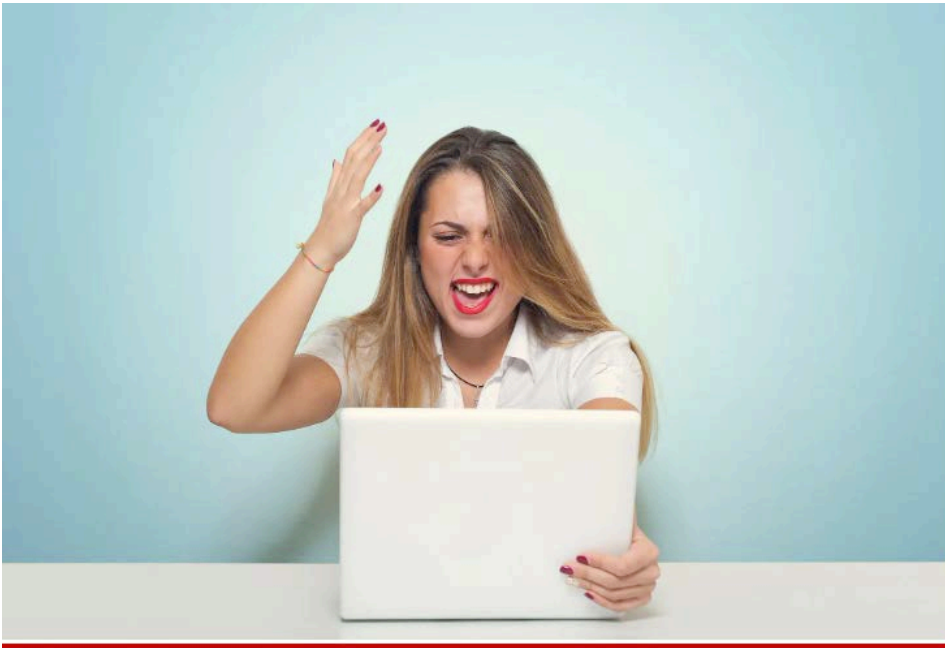
“Attempt to understand what it’s like from their lived experience,” she said. “We can bridge gaps and understand each other better.”

You may not be as far apart as you think

Studies conducted by Harvard professors [Julia Minson](#) and [Francesca Gino](#) show that workers aren’t, for the most part, as diverse on a given matter as they think they are.

“In our executive education classes, we have found that teaching leaders how to find points of agreement with people who hold opposing views makes them more willing to engage with information from them,” the pair wrote in a Harvard Business Review article.

Choose acceptance



At Work recommends starting with empathy if conflict arises at work.
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Come from a place of acceptance versus resignation, said Sarah Noll Wilson. Not: "Throwing our hands up, saying, 'That's just how Terry is, there is no changing him.'" Acceptance is understanding the situation for what it is and even if you don't agree, choose to work within the reality and show up in a way that best serves you and the situation.

So instead, "Say, 'I know this is how Terry is and while I cannot change him, I can control me and how I show up.'" "

Show respect

"Each person ultimately decides how they want to show up in relationships where there are significant differences," said Noll Wilson. "Ask yourself, 'What am I OK accepting? What am I not OK to accept? What, if any, nonnegotiables do I hold?'" "

There isn't a one-size-fits-all approach, and what you need from a work relationship will shift as your world evolves.

"Also, what might be a deal-breaker for me and how I interact with someone, may not be a deal-breaker for someone else," said Noll Wilson. "We don't get to decide or control what is important to other people, but we can work to understand them, even if we don't agree."