

How to Improve Relationships With Hostile Coworkers

By DIANNA BOOHER SEPTEMBER 20, 2021



If we've learned anything from Covid-19, the related vaccinations and mandates, work-from-home arrangements, return-to-the-office options, or financial incentives, it's this: People hate to be forced to do anything, even if convinced it might be to their benefit.

Sooner or later, you're going to run into a similar wall of resistance from a coworker who acts hostile toward you because they've been forced to cooperate with you or work with you against their will.

Either their boss has made a decision to deal with you and left them iced out, or they've served on a decision-making team and cast a dissenting vote against you. Subsequently, they've been selected to serve as your point of contact. Ouch!

You may also find yourself in the tough position of handling a Hostile Hostage when you're the only kid on the block with the expertise the coworker wants or needs. They feel like the 7-year-old saying to a parent, "I hate you and I'm going to run away from home. Would you pack me lunch, please?" And you want to respond, "I feel like *letting* you run away from home — but I'm your parent and need to take care of you!"

So how to work together to implement a decision or project when your coworker feels as though they have been "taken hostage" in the situation?

Don't Pull Rank If You Came in Higher Up in the Food Chain

If you've already worked to make a decision with the Hostile Hostage's boss, never flaunt that situation. Your Hostile Hostage knows that all too well. Set your goal on winning the confidence and trust of your current contact — the person you need to work with day to day to get the job done.

Eliminate comments such as "When Ms. VIP and I spoke the other day, we were discussing the critical importance of ..." or "Mr. VIP wanted me to let you know that he prefers ..." Such comments convey that you're on the inside track and the coworker is the outsider in their own backyard.

Never Assume You Can Quit Selling the Decision, Idea, or Change

Just because the boss "made the decision" at some point, don't assume automatically that the decision can't or won't be reversed. Assume that you personally must also establish your personal credibility with the Hostile Hostage as it relates to the idea, plan, or organization.

Although you may not make other formal presentations, look for opportunities to drop your credentials and evidence of performance into your conversations. Every contact, particularly the

primary liaison, needs confidence that you can deliver what you promised.

Make the Hostile Coworker a Star

Never leave your Hostile Hostage in the dark about what kind of “press” they’re getting when you’re alone with the boss. Copy the boss on emails of commendation about how they’re handling, say, the implementation of a project.. Make sure your oral comments to the boss get “filtered” back down to the Hostile Hostage. Also make sure that the Hostile Hostage stars in your story, and let them know they’re critical to the outcome and your success.

Expecting someone to love being forced to accept and implement decisions with which they disagree is unreasonable. But upgrading their hostility to cooperation is entirely reasonable and possible.



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Dianna Booher is the bestselling author of 49 books, published in 62 foreign-language editions. She helps organizations to communicate clearly and leaders to expand their influence by a strong executive presence — and often by their own published book. Her latest books include *Faster, Fewer, Better Emails*; *Communicate Like a Leader*; *What MORE Can I Say?*; *Creating Personal Presence*; and *Communicate With Confidence*. National Media such as *Good Morning America*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street*

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