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## Workplace Relationships



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*Luke 3:14* "...And he said unto them, Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages."

*Romans 12:18* "If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men."

As we come in contact and rub shoulders with people at work, we find a great diversity of personalities, job expectations, and levels of interpersonal relationship skills. Are there some co-workers to whom you are drawn because they seem to have a magnetic personality? Are there others you would rather not encounter at all? Do you find that the attitudes of some co-workers rub off on you and can either help or hinder your productivity and effectiveness? How does your attitude affect those who work with you? Scripture teaches we are to live peaceably with all men as much as possible. How can we do that?

Identifying personality types is a good place to begin. Without question, some people are more difficult to interact with than others. These relationships are sometimes called "high-maintenance" relationships<sup>1</sup>.

- The Critic: constantly complains and gives unwanted advice.
- The Martyr: forever the victim and wracked with self-pity.
- The Wet Blanket: pessimistic and automatically negative.
- The Steamroller: blindly insensitive to others.
- The Gossip: spreads rumors and leaks secrets.
- The Control Freak: unable to let go and let be.
- The Backstabber: irrepressibly two-faced.
- The Cold Shoulder: disengages and avoids contact.
- The Green-Eyed Monster: seethes with envy.
- The Volcano: builds steam and threatens to erupt.
- The Sponge: constantly in need but gives nothing back.
- The Competitor: keeps track of tit for tat.
- The Workhorse: always pushes and is never satisfied.
- The Flirt: imparts innuendos, which may border on harassment.
- The Chameleon: eager to please and avoids conflict.

In addition to these personalities, there are four basic behaviors often exhibited in the workplace<sup>2</sup>:

- Passive Behavior: intent is to please.
- Passive Aggressive Behavior: intent is "I'll get you."
- Aggressive Behavior: intent is to dominate or humiliate.
- Assertive Behavior: intent is to communicate.

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While easy to recognize these behaviors and personalities in others, it is often a challenge to recognize them in ourselves. Juggling these relationships may seem a bit daunting and difficult in workplace interactions. We suggest seven key ideas to handling difficult workplace situations:

1. Focusing on the goal of a conflict: ensuring conflict generates light, not just heat.
2. Understand the types of high-maintenance relationships
3. Knowing who is responsible for what when there is conflict.
4. Understanding levels of communication: facts versus feelings.
5. Understanding filters and barriers to effective communication.
6. Being an assertive communicator.
7. Having empathy, humility, and self-examination.

The following are practical application ideas for each of the seven key ideas:.

1. Focusing on the goal of a conflict: ensuring conflict generates light, not just heat.

*John 12:36* “While ye have light, believe in the light, that ye may be the children of light...”

*Ephesians 5:21* “Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.”

The Word of God holds us to a high standard of conduct when interacting with others. We are encouraged to focus on improving workplace relationships and to strive for solutions through conflict that benefit all involved rather than just producing anger and strife. Goal-focused conflict is not a negative thing and is necessary for reaching and maintaining a productive and efficient workplace environment. For instance, a certain behavior may need to be confronted so positive changes can be made. In any healthy discussion, some conflict is needed so that all ideas presented might be considered. In a conflict situation, we need to keep the contributions we may offer productive and “in the light.” In the greatest conflict ever recorded, Jesus demonstrated the ultimate example of focusing on the goal, “Father if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done,” *Luke 22:42*. Our motives should be pure and above reproach desiring only that outcome which is biblically sound and a benefit to everyone. Taking this stand may require us to receive less than what we feel we deserve. We may have to “take the short end.” The Bible reminds us we are to be in the fear of God and thus ready to submit to one another.

2. Understand the types of high-maintenance relationships

*Proverbs 14:29* “He that is slow to wrath is of great understanding: but he that is hasty of spirit exalteth folly.”

*James 1:19-20* “Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.”

We need to understand the personalities and behavior of others and learn how to work with them no matter how difficult that may seem. In a single day you may encounter many of the different personalities listed earlier and all four types of behaviors. However, leaving the company of others and secluding yourself just to avoid contact with others is not considered appropriate behavior and may not be a good example. It might be a good idea to write down the different personalities listed here and keep them in a place that is easily accessed for future reference. Remember it is not your job to change the personalities of others but rather strive to work with and tolerate them in a godly way. The Apostle Paul, in *Galatians 5:15*, warns us what the consequences might be if we allow self to dictate our actions, “But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed

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*that ye be not consumed one of another.*” A good starting place is the biblical instruction to not be “hasty of spirit” and to be “slow to wrath.” We may not know enough about a co-worker’s life to make an informed judgment and we are better off to be “slow to speak.”

3. Knowing who is responsible for what when there is conflict.

*Proverbs 11:14* “Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety.”

*Proverbs 12:1* “Whoso loveth instruction loveth knowledge: but he that hateth reproof is brutish.”

Misunderstandings can abound in the workplace when roles and responsibilities aren’t clearly understood. We may need to get a clarification of the expectations of our position or an explanation of the chain of command. Management may not be aware there are misunderstood roles and, in some cases, adequate job descriptions are lacking. We may not be in a position to correct the misunderstandings but we should still kindly make the situation known to whomever is in charge. In *Mark 14:68* we read that Peter, the disciple, clearly did not understand the mission and purpose of His Lord neither did he understand his own role and boldly proclaimed, “*Although all shall be offended, yet will not I.*”

4. Understanding levels of communication: facts versus feelings.

*Proverbs 15:1* “A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger.”

*Hebrews 13:16* “But to do good and to communicate forget not...”

Escalations in workplace conflict often are the result of feelings getting in the way of facts. We are advised to be very careful how we communicate both verbally and non-verbally. So often we may be saying something with our mouths but be relaying something quite different by our tone of voice, our body language, or our eye contact. When we feel we’ve been wronged or our feelings have been hurt, we need to be very careful to keep our words few and our tone of voice soft. The facts may indicate we were not the best candidate for a promotion even though we may have worked towards it for a long time. Facts, effectively communicated, are necessary for workplace function and productive operation. Feelings can cause great difficulty and must be balanced with the facts. *Proverbs 20:6* contrasts feelings and facts, “*Most men will proclaim every one his own goodness: but a faithful [truthful] man who can find?*”

5. Understanding filters and barriers to effective communication.

*John 7:24* “Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment.”

*Colossians 3:13* “Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.”

No matter our place in life, barriers to effective communication and filters through which we hear will exist. Some barriers are physical, like being too far away to hear correctly. Others are environmental, such as too much noise or other distractions. However, one of the most difficult filters or barriers to deal with is prejudice and personal opinion formed by experience and/or information from others. In *John 8:43*, Jesus told the Jews they couldn’t hear Him because of their prejudice, “Why do ye not understand my speech? even because ye cannot hear my word.” We can easily make wrong judgments about others and when incorrect judgments influence our communication negatively, our relationships suffer. How often have we said something about someone only to later find out we had poorly judged them? But then, how easy is it to correct what we may have said? The negative fallout from misspoken opinions can be a formidable barrier to effective communication.

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## 6. Being an assertive communicator.

*Proverbs 23:23* “Buy the truth, and sell it not; also wisdom, and instruction, and understanding.”

*Romans 12:17* “Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men.”

Being an assertive communicator is an obtainable goal. We can express and assert our legitimate rights, needs, and desires in a godly way that does not violate the rights of others. However, this usually requires us to be emotionally honest, direct, and expressive. Once our needs and desires are expressed in a proper fashion, we can feel better about our interactions with others. Sometimes the word “assertive” can have a negative undertone and may imply striving to get our own way or force our own agenda. We are cautioned to remember our self-worth should be in Christ and therefore the tendency to be too aggressive should be tempered by grace. In *Galatians 2:11*, we find an example of assertive behavior, “*But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed.*” The Apostle Paul did not go behind Peter’s back but spoke to him face-to-face in love.

## 7. Having empathy, humility, and self-examination.

*Ecclesiastes 5:2* “Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few.”

*Galatians 6:10* “As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.”

The fundamental building blocks of relationships are empathy, humility, and self-examination. Establishing and maintaining those building blocks are core elements of successful workplace relationships.

Empathy is the capability to identify with and share another’s situation, feelings and emotions. We are advised to “walk a mile in his/her shoes” before making a judgment. The promotion we thought we needed may have gone to someone else who needs it far more than we do. The responsibilities we have may seem heavy and unfairly distributed until we understand a little more about the life of our coworker and we realize that we don’t have it so rough after all. *Romans 12:15-16* instructs us to, “*Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep. Be of the same mind one toward another...*”. We do not all share the same desires for working. Some live to work and others work to live.

Courteous respect is a sign of humility. True humility can be an elusive virtue in a workplace environment that is productivity driven. Competition between employees may be the norm and some companies encourage that behavior. God’s Word reminds us to do good unto *all* men and there is no exception given. False humility, on the other hand, is hypocritical and deceitful and should not be named among God’s children. *Proverbs 11:9* “*An hypocrite with his mouth destroyeth his neighbour: but through knowledge shall the just be delivered.*”

Perhaps the most effective advice for achieving and maintaining good workplace relationships is to examine ourselves regularly and look into the mirror of God’s Word. Just exactly how do our motives line up with the biblical principles of contriteness, submission, purity, humility, peace, faith, love, longsuffering, temperance, etc.? In *2 Corinthians 13:5* we are encouraged to look into our own selves and to prove our own selves, “*Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves...*”. In *Psalms 139:23-24* we are further advised to pray God would search our hearts. “*Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*”

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We may not be able to change the behavior of those around us but we can change our behavior. We are expected to model ourselves after Christ and His example of trust, integrity, and faith. Our workplace motto should be to have a proper attitude toward authority, be committed to excellence in our work, and be committed to excellence in the treatment of others.

*1 Peter 1:15 “But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation;”*

*1 Peter 2:18 “Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward.”*

## References

1. Parrott III, Les(1997). High-Maintenance Relationships. Illinois: Tyndale House.
2. <http://serenityonlinetherapy.com/assertiveness.htm>

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