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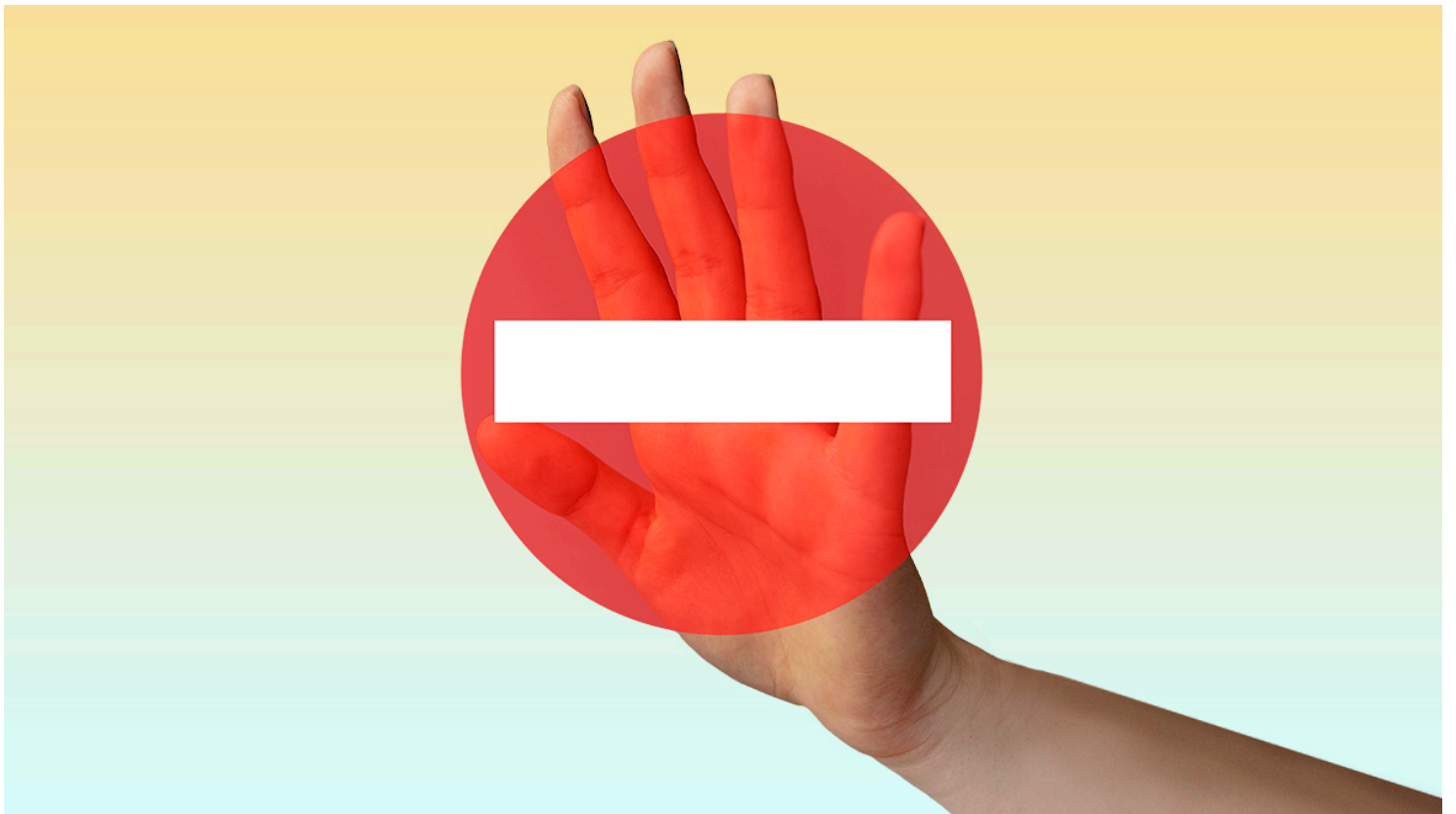
**Harvard
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Review**

Difficult Conversations

Managing a Colleague Who Doesn't Like You

by Ruchira Chaudhary

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Summary. One of the toughest situations you can face as a new manager is having a direct report who holds negative feelings towards you. Here are ways to manage the situation. Think and reflect: The problem isn't always the other person. It could just as likely be you, your... [more](#)

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As a leader, you can't expect everyone to like you. Likability, as is the case with many things, needs to be earned. Still, one of the toughest situations you can face as a new manager is having a direct report who holds negative feelings towards you.

Throughout my experience as an executive coach, I've worked with numerous managers and leaders who have "been there." How do you deal with this kind of dilemma at work?

First, you need to be able to read the tell-tale signs. Below are a few common indicators that someone on your team dislikes you:

- They agree with your advice in team meetings but disregard it after.
- They gossip about you behind your back.
- They respond to you in monosyllables (yes, sure, okay).
- They display defensive body language (folding their arms or glazing over you when you talk).
- They do not smile around you, turn their back when they see you walk past, or maintain poor eye contact.
- They do not acknowledge your presence in meetings and rarely approach you with work-related questions.

If you let this tension go unacknowledged, it can lead to a stressful work environment for everyone involved and negatively impact performance. But the solution is not to order your direct report to behave differently. Today, leading and managing is about asking not telling, and about collaborating, partnering, and finding solutions collectively.

I'm not suggesting that you exhaust yourself trying to persuade this person to like you. (There is only so much you can do about it.) But I am advising you to try to find common ground and develop a more amicable relationship — for you and for the rest of your team. After all, your success as a manager depends largely on the collective efforts of those you lead.

Think and reflect

The problem isn't always the other person. It could just as likely be you, your management style, or a bias you hold that you are unaware of and is reflected in how you engage with this employee or how they engage with you.

Learn about yourself.

It's possible you're giving the team member a reason to dislike you because of how you manage them. Use the questions below to guide your self-reflection.

- **What kind of boss are you?** Maybe you're micromanaging this person without realizing it. Or maybe you haven't done a great job of giving them clear instructions or you assume this person understands what you need of them.
- **Are you consistent?** Maybe you said no to a request they made but yes to another colleague who made a similar

request. Or maybe you approved a process one day and then without giving a reason, changed your mind about it.

- **Do you overlook them during meetings?** Perhaps they've tried to speak up during meetings, but you've never given them a chance.
- **How much do you know them?** Maybe you haven't made an effort to get to know them, but you seem to know a lot about others on the team.

Check your own biases.

If you feel you haven't given the team member an obvious reason to dislike you, do a quick check on your own biases. Often, unconscious biases can impact how we behave or interact with others. We may often make judgements based on our prior experience or assumptions based on gender, race or other factors without even realizing it.

Look around the team. Is everyone else "like you" except the employee in question? You might have fallen into the "affinity bias" trap. Think about whether you're comparing this person to a star performer on the team (the way they speak, how they work, their energy). (This is known as the contrast effect.) Maybe you're tasked with managing an older employee who is creative and smart but lacks technical know-how and takes more time to get work done. It might be that you're discriminating against their

age (ageism) or your fundamental distaste for the opposing work style is showing up in the way you manage this person (criticizing their work in front of colleagues, micromanaging their schedules, etc).

Think if it could be associated with cultural/generational stereotypes

One of my biggest learnings when I worked at a large traditional Indian organization was that many of my direct reports were not pleased to have a younger, female boss. It wasn't personal — it was cultural. The American consulting firm I came from was informal, non-hierarchical with a rather flat structure. My new organization's culture was still seeped in formality, and viewed your age as directly proportional to your ability to add value to others. They just didn't want to be managed by someone with less experience than them.

I had to work extra hard to win them over and to demonstrate I could add value despite my age. Generational differences can be hard to navigate and they require patience. I spent a lot of time with each of my team members listening, taking their views to heart, and assuring them that we could learn from each other. I reiterated that they could trust me, and my leadership mantra was all about collaboration.

Hit Refresh

Once you've had a chance to reflect and check your own biases, it's time to focus on what you can do to manage the situation – whether the problem lies with you, your employee, or both in equal measure.

Have an honest, open conversation.

The golden rule of having a difficult conversation like this is to be transparent about your goal when you reach out to the team member who dislikes you. For example, you could say, “I wanted to get some time with you to talk about our working relationship. I feel some dead air, and I think it's important to clear it out,” or, “I've been feeling something is amiss, and I wanted to see if there was a way for us to clear the air so that it doesn't get in the way of us achieving our goals together.”

As someone who has led teams, I've learned that in order to make someone comfortable with opening up, you have to demonstrate vulnerability yourself. Maybe even acknowledge that you might have made some mistakes along the way but are now keen to fix it.

During the conversation, level up and openly air your challenges in working with them. Then, give them an opportunity to do the same. I recommend a structured approach to this conversation, such as using the GROW framework below.

Establish the *Goal*: Say something like: “Our goal today is to work towards a better working relationship so that we can create a healthier work environment where you can flourish and grow while focusing on larger team/organization’s goals.”

State the *Reality*: Let both parties share how they’re feeling and describe their current reality. For example, you could begin with, “I feel we haven’t started out on the right foot, and I am keen to make this better. Happy to receive feedback on how I could be a better leader, and I hope you will let me give you feedback on how I feel you could play to your potential. Remember, regardless of how this conversation pans out, we both have a job to do, and I want us to do that exceptionally well.”

Then let your colleague state their reality.

Once that is done, try and use open-ended questions to help your team member share more of how they are feeling with you. Here are some you could consider:

- Is there a broader or a more specific issue that I can address?
- Would you like to tell me more about how you felt when...?
- How can we make our relationship better?
- Is there anything holding you back?

Avoid questions that will put your team member on the spot, make them feel like it's their fault, or make them defensive. For example:

- Have I done something that is making you so hostile?
- Is there a reason why you do not engage with me in team meetings?
- What is the problem?
- Why is it that you found it problematic?

Explore the *Options*: Once you've both shared your realities, and you have a better idea of what's going on with your team member it's time to jointly explore the possible ways you can address it and move forward. Again, use open-ended questions so your colleague has a chance to share more information.

For example, if your colleague says they never feel heard or seen, you could say, "I do try and seek opinions from everyone during meetings. If you've felt that way, how can I help you feel more seen or heard?"

Here are some other questions you could use:

- How can we commit to being more open with each other?

- Could I/we do something differently?
- I will do my bit to strengthen our relationship (...in these ways). What do you feel about that?
- Can you think of ways in which you could make our relationship better?

Think of the *Way Forward*: Close the meeting by reassuring your colleague that you're there to support them and work toward a stronger working relationship. You could say, "Lets discuss the next steps before we close. I wish to reiterate my commitment to making this relationship better."

Remember to seek feedback before they leave the conversation. You can ask them:

- How did you find our conversation? I hope it was helpful.
- What other support do you need and from whom?
- Is there anything else you want to talk about now?

Be sure to listen carefully as they speak. You may even repeat what they told you to show that you are truly paying attention. For instance, "As we discussed, going forward I will check if you are keen on taking on a new client relationship, and not simply assume you don't have the bandwidth to do more."

But this is a perfect scenario. You might be in a situation where the individual is not open or engaging, or they continue to act cold and respond in monosyllables (or says there is no problem). In that case there is not much more you can do except try your best to make this difficult conversation as comfortable and open as possible. You need to let them know that you're ready and willing to make a change if they're willing too.

Continue your efforts.

Having one conversation is like scratching the surface. It's not going to be that magic pill; you will need to make concerted efforts to form a foundation of trust with this person. Trust is what every healthy relationship is built on and unless your employee trusts you and is convinced you have their back, they will not change the way they feel about you.

One follow up tactic that I've found to be effective is *checking in* with your team member versus *checking on* them.

Here's what it looks like:

Are you checking in or checking on?

<i>Checking IN</i>	<i>Checking ON</i>
How are things shaping up?	Have you finished the client project yet?

Do you have everything you need to do your job?	You didn't manage to get that appointment?
What are your views on this client's situation?	Have you managed to find the problem, or should I step in?
Can the team support you in any way with the deadline?	What's taking you so long to get that done?

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When you're *checking in*, not only are you touching base to find out if they are doing okay or if they need any support to do their job, but you're also showing that you trust them to carry out the tasks. When you're *checking on* them you come across more authoritarian, as if you are a micromanager breathing down their neck and sending the clear signal that you do not trust them to do the job in time, or with the expected quality.

Finally remember despite your best efforts, not everyone is going to like you. You have to accept the fact that you may not always win a popularity contest. It's not a manager's responsibility to be liked by their employees. It's their job to fuel employee engagement and create a work environment in which their team can thrive. At the very least, learn to accept your differences, agree to disagree but do not ignore the individual or subconsciously penalize them. As a leader your role is ultimately to help everyone become more capable and better version of themselves.

Ruchira Chaudhary is an alumna of the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, and straddles the corporate and academic worlds — she is a leading executive coach, adjunct faculty at several top tier business schools, and founder of TrueNorth Consulting that focuses on organizational strategy solutions. She is the author of *Coaching: The Secret Code to Uncommon Leadership* (Penguin Random House, April 2021).

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