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## **ARTICLE** **COMMUNICATION**

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*by Mark Nevins*

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A few months ago, a former client — let's call her Kacie— called me to check in. I had supported her through her transition when she had joined a prestigious global financial services firm several months prior. Given how deliberately and thoughtfully she'd gone through the process, I expected that our conversation would be about her early wins.

Instead, Kacie confessed that she had a simple but serious problem: she wasn't getting along well with a peer-level executive — let's call her Marta. The two had gotten off on the wrong foot, and as time passed things weren't getting any better. Kacie told me that it was becoming painfully clear that

her inability to get along with Marta was going to impede her success, and possibly derail her career at the company.

As Kacie and I explored the situation, she told me that Marta was seen as a highly talented, accomplished, and well-liked executive — she wasn't toxic or difficult. But Kacie admitted that she didn't really *like* Marta. They had different styles, and Marta rubbed her the wrong way.

Over a series of conversations, Kacie and I worked through the situation. She revisited the stakeholder map she had created in her first few weeks in the role, which clearly showed that Marta's collaboration and partnership were essential for getting the business results Kacie wanted. In assessing the relationship more honestly, Kacie came to realize that she had been failing to reach out to Marta. She had not made her new colleague feel like her input and perspectives were valuable, had been leaving her and her team off communications, and had more or less been trying to avoid her.

Kacie developed a handful of useful strategies for working better with Marta. While none were particularly easy or comfortable, these are ideas and insights that almost anyone can use when they have to work with someone they just don't like.

**Reflect on the cause of tension and how you are responding to it.** The first step is both acceptance and reflection. Remind yourself: You won't get along with everyone but there is potential value in every interaction with others. You can and should learn from almost everyone you meet, and the responsibility for making that happen lies with you even if the relationship is not an easy one. Take an honest look at what is causing the tension and what role you play in creating it. It may be that your reaction to the situation is at the core of the problem (and you can't control anything other than your reaction). Kacie had to recognize that Marta's "unlikability" may really have been about Kacie herself.

**Work harder to understand the other person's perspective.** Few people get out of bed in the morning with the goal of making your life miserable. Make time to think deliberately about the other person's point of view, especially if that person is essential to your success. Ask yourself: Why is this person acting this way? What might be motivating them? How do they see me? What might they want and need from me? Kacie began to think differently about Marta as she came to appreciate that her colleague had goals and motivations as valid as her own and that their goals were not inherently in conflict.

**Become a problem solver rather than a critic or competitor.** To work better together, it's important to [shift from a competitive stance to a collaborative one](#). One tactic is to "give" the other person the problem. Rather than trying to work through or around the other person, engage them directly. Kacie invited Marta out to lunch and was open with her: "I don't feel like we are working together as effectively as we could. What do you think? Do you have any ideas for how we can work better together?" [If you ask people to show you their cards](#), and demonstrate vulnerability in the process, they will often reveal a few of their own.

**Ask more questions.** In tense situations, many of us try to “tell” our way through it. We might become overly assertive, which usually makes the situation worse. Instead, try asking questions — ideally open-ended ones intended to create conversation. Put aside your own agenda, [ask good questions](#), and have the patience to truly listen to the other person’s answers.

**Enhance your awareness of your interpersonal style.** It’s easy to chalk up conflicts to poor “[chemistry](#)” with another person but everyone has different styles and often being aware of those differences can help. Over lunch, Marta and Kacie discovered that they had both completed the Myers-Briggs earlier in their careers, so they shared their profiles. Kacie is both a clear introvert and a very strong sensing type: she prefers to have time to work through issues alone and quietly, and to draw conclusions from a broad base of data. Marta, on the other hand, is an extrovert and a strong intuitive type, comfortable reacting immediately, focusing on the big picture, and solving problems by talking them through with others. Given these differences in style and preference, Kacie and Marta were bound to find interacting with each other uncomfortable. But once they identified their differences, they realized that their styles could be quite complementary if they adapted and accommodated their approaches.

**Ask for help.** Asking for help can reboot a difficult relationship because it shows that you value the other person’s intelligence and experience. Over their lunch, Kacie grew confident enough to say to Marta, “You’ve been around here longer than I have. I feel like I’m starting to figure things out, but I’d love your help.” Then she asked questions like: “What should I be doing more or less of? Am I missing anything or failing to connect with anyone I really should? What do you wish someone had told you when *you* first started working here?”

Kacie and Marta’s relationship significantly improved. During my last call with Kacie, she told me that she and Marta communicate frequently in-person and via text and Slack, and they regularly take part in each other’s team meetings. Each quarter they bring their whole teams together to assess progress and seek opportunities to learn and improve their processes. While Marta and Kacie aren’t necessarily friends and don’t spend a lot of time together outside the office, they’re much better colleagues, and they like each other more than they initially suspected.

Kacie’s success in turning around her relationship with Marta was in part because she acted while “the cement was still wet.” Her negative dynamic with Marta hadn’t yet hardened so Kacie was able to increase her self-awareness, adapt her style, and reach out. It is possible to collaborate effectively with people you don’t like, but *you* have to take the lead.

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