

How to work with annoying people

Co-workers really can be tolerated

By Michelle Archer
Special for USA TODAY

There is always at least one person at work who rubs you the wrong way or, worse, seems out to get you.

That's why the audience for the catchy-titled *Working with You Is Killing Me* is potentially vast.

The authors know the feeling of dread in your stomach at the mere thought of interacting with the client who does nothing but scream at you. They understand how maddening it is when someone else takes credit for your ideas or spreads nasty rumors about you.

As self-described "undercover business therapists," psychotherapist Katherine Crowley and small-business consultant Kathi Elster say they've found that co-workers are often the source of more stress than your job.

The trick to dealing with night-

Working with You Is Killing Me: Freeing Yourself from Emotional Traps at Work

By Katherine Crowley and Kathi Elster
Warner Business Books, 232 pages, \$22.95

mare co-workers is a process Crowley and Elster call unhooking — essentially a method of chilling out and examining the relationship to change your reaction to it. As they wisely point out, you aren't likely to change the person who is causing you to feel angry, frustrated, thwarted or trapped.

The authors say it takes four steps to escape the predicament:

► **Unhook physically.** Release negative energy by taking a deep breath, going for a walk or splashing water on your face.

► **Unhook mentally.** Dissect the issue by asking yourself a series of questions: What's happening here? What's their part? What's my part? What are my options? For example, if you sit next to the Loudest Guy in the Universe and are constantly distracted, his part is that he's loud. Your part is that you haven't said anything because you keep hoping someone else will or he'll quit. Your options are to ask to be moved or to delicately ask Mr. Loud to pipe down.

► **Unhook verbally.** Find the words to protect yourself or escape the workplace trap. With Mr. Loud, say something like, "You've got a powerful voice that really carries. Can you speak at a lower volume?"

► **Unhook with a business tool.** Documents such as job descriptions, contracts, memos and performance reviews depersonalize challenging situations and provide objective ways to track events and measure performance, the authors say.

Unhooking from some situations can be tricky. The authors define five villains, or what they call "fatal attractions," at work who require advanced unhooking techniques:

► **The Exploder.** A charismatic person who detonates at the drop of a hat and tends to shout.

► **The Empty Pit.** A troubled person who constantly seeks advice but refuses to follow it.

► **The Saboteur.** This person is your biggest fan to your face but is committing acts of sabotage behind your back.

► **The Pedestal Smasher.** Initially, this type is full of compliments, but they're really just building you up to knock you down.

► **The Chip-on-the-Shoulder.** This type feels they've been wronged by life in some way and is often hostile or defensive.

In an e-mail interview, Crowley and Elster talked about their own experiences.

Crowley said she has a gift for attracting Pedestal Smashers. "In one case, I was working with a woman who told me initially that she was recommending me to all her friends," she said. "Within weeks, however, she began to complain that I didn't know how to help her and that her past therapist understood her better than I ever could."

Crowley said she used the unhooking process to accept that her client regularly built up and tore down people. "Once I accepted who she was, I could take her criticism less personally and try to truly help her. She continued to work with me for five years."

Some situations are incurable, and require drastic measures, such as changing jobs or severing the relationship.

Elster found herself hooked by an Exploder and ultimately found a way to fire her as a client by having her think it was her idea to part.

But both Elster and Crowley agree that the Saboteur is the hardest type to handle because if they're good, you may not notice what's happening to your reputation until the damage is done.

A hefty portion of the book is justifiably devoted to bosses, including tips to keep your sanity around difficult, extreme bosses and novel advice on managing up

by identifying your supervisor's limitations and overcoming them.

Crowley and Elster have produced a clinical but thoughtful approach to regaining control of work situations that are out of hand.

Instead of reaching for the antidotes, agitated employees would do well to use *Working with You Is Killing Me* as a template for coping with workplace villains.



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