

Principles Under
Pressure: Working in
Adversarial Relationships
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Have you ever worked with a colleague who acted in ways that were simply wrong for you, for their other co-workers, for your employer and, actually, for themselves too if they thought about it?

They may have had a closely structured working relationship with you as far as the org chart goes, but their conduct was anything but collaborative. In fact, this colleague operated from their own emotionally derived, inner agenda which was in opposition to you and the aims of your work together. And they could have been your boss, your peer or your team member.

Maybe your colleague had a habit of saying one thing but then doing another. Perhaps they offered to do something for you in time for a deadline you were working to or agreed to input to your meeting or project. But, when it came down to it, they didn't quite find the time. And when you called them on their failure to deliver they were flip, nonchalant, even unbothered that they'd let you down. Or maybe they initiated against you from time to time, perhaps by exaggerating the extent of a mistake you'd made when talking about it with other colleagues, or by deliberately

making it difficult for you to get a decision or outcome you wanted over an issue that mattered to you. Maybe your colleague predominantly disagreed with you in meetings, preferring to oppose your view or proposals rather than take value from them. Or perhaps they simply put their energy towards continuing a conflict with you or leaving it unresolved rather than towards finding a solution to the issues.

Of course, not every adversarial colleague displays traits as strong as these, and some are quite mild in comparison. Your colleague may have only displayed their adversarial side with some people some of the time or over some issues only. Or they may have only dipped into adversarial mode on an irregular or infrequent basis. In fact, in the main, you may have had a productive working relationship with your colleague and have gotten on well with them when they were not using adversarial behavior.

But, however it was, this colleague was problematic for you to deal with and didn't use the open, transparent and supportive behavior you usually associate with colleagues working together in the same organisation.

To whatever extent, you came to view working with this character as a chore and a source of discomfort. And it sapped your energy and your resolve to have to work too closely with them on a regular basis.

Challenging Behavior: Low Trust, Low Support

We've all have dealings with people like this in the workplace, people who don't extend trust easily, who don't ask for it either, and who use behavior which is both unsupportive and challenging to deal with. We've all had experience of the co-worker who said "sure, we can work together on this" but who, when push came to shove, didn't offer anything, didn't turn up to the meeting and didn't want to address this issue with you when you subsequently raised it with them. We've all dealt with the oppositional colleague who seemed to oppose your point of view on *instinct* rather than because they really had thought about the issues and genuinely concluded that they had a major problem with the ideas you generated and put out there.

But, and this is the really hard part, the lingering doubt at the back of your mind is that this colleague acts against you, lets you down and contradicts your point of view primarily because it is in their nature to do so. Not because they really do disagree with you to the extent to which they say they do or because they did forget the deadline or were too busy to give you their considered opinion or whatever it is. No. If these things had happened once or twice, then perhaps you could put them down to forgetfulness or happenstance. But, there were repeated examples of each of these things happening. A pattern. And so the sequence of events, the regularity of them, creates a nagging doubt at the back of your mind that this character does these things and says these things *on purpose*, that they usually handle things this way because they want to. It's how they are. For some reason they feel the need to act in untrustworthy and unsupportive ways with you and with their other colleagues, and do so on a regular basis.

And, putting it quite simply, your instinct might be right.

This manifesto is about how to work with such an adversarial character, whether they are your boss, peer or team member. It is about how to use the specific behavior you need to use to help you

manage the unclear boundaries, ambivalent motives and occasional duplicitous conduct that characterizes adversarial working relationships. By the end of the manifesto I hope you will have the insight and interpersonal know-how you need to handle these tricky co-workers more effectively and retain the degree of influence in your work with them that you would like to have.

Adversarial Behavior: Personalized Enmity

You have a challenging colleague. This character says and does adversarial, oppositional things while working with you. You just don't get it. What could account for their wish to handle things this way? You think that at least some of their motivation in constantly pushing the boundaries when dealing with you is simply their wish to see what they can get away with. And you might also be right when you surmise that their tactics erode the trust and support which might otherwise exist in their relationship with you had they chosen to handle things in a different way.

But why would your colleague deliberately and consistently act in ways which erode trust in their working relationship with you?

Why would they consistently use behavior which cannot help but reduce the quality of dialogue and connection that is possible between the two of you?

Why would they purposefully use an approach which damages the quality of the work which the two of you are able to produce together?

Well, I think it's because your troublesome co-worker, the one who acts against you and other colleagues in smaller and in larger ways, however infrequently or more often, is motivated, at least in part, by an adversarial mindset.

Defining What Constitutes an Adversarial Mindset

Consider the following three part definition of an adversarial colleague.¹

- An adversarial colleague is one who uses behavior which erodes trust at work while introducing a level of personalised enmity into a working relationship with a manager, peer or team member.
- This colleague does not act in line with their workplace requirement to build and maintain effective relationships with co-workers for the good of their employer, but handles their workplace relationships as a series of separate and discrete transactions.
- This colleague's behavior precludes much, or sometimes any, trust being developed or maintained with their co-workers and necessarily results in low levels of support existing in their relationships. Trust and support are likely to remain at low levels throughout the period during which a relationship is characterised by this colleague's transactional approach towards other people at work.

So, an adversarial working relationship is one in which, at least in structural terms, you and your colleague are seemingly working together to achieve objectives relevant to your job descriptions on behalf of your employer. The challenge for you is that your troublesome colleague handles the relationship with you in an inimical way—however frequently or infrequently they do so.

The emotion that they bring into the relationship necessarily results in them using behavior which prevents usual levels of trust from forming or from being maintained, and rules out supportive exchanges between the two of you. Your colleague sometimes or often personalises their ill will towards you in a series of provocative actions which, depending on their gravity and regularity,

¹ Reproduced with the permission of Palgrave Macmillan from Chapter 1 of *Working in Adversarial Relationships: How to Operate Effectively in Relationships Characterised by Little Trust or Support* by Aryanne Oade (2010).

continue to injure their relationship with you and could reduce it to one characterised by ongoing opposition.

Should the relationship become one that is consistently characterised by your colleague's adversarial or oppositional behavior it is no longer about the two of you working towards shared objectives on behalf of your employer. It becomes about their antagonism towards you, your work and your goals, a state of affairs which results in them placing higher priority on acting on these instincts rather than any other set of workplace considerations. And so, working with you, improving service to customers, creating improved internal work processes or designing better products aren't really the issue, even if your adversarial colleague says they are. Instead, it's your adversarial colleague's wish to act against you that takes center stage in their mind and which drives as much of their behavior towards you as they allow.

And, of course, you might be minded to retaliate in kind and also employ adversarial methods out of chagrin, a desire to teach your colleague a lesson or to even the score. And understandable though your frustration and anger are, your actions can then exacerbate the situation between you further and lead to a cycle of adversarial behavior developing between you.

They inevitably set some of their working relationships up to fail.

They promote disagreement and conflict at work.

An Adversarial Colleague or a Bullying Colleague?

As I see it, your adversarial colleague may be troublesome and difficult to deal with but they are not necessarily a bully. They could also use bullying behavior but it doesn't automatically follow. To my mind, a bully is someone who deliberately uses behavior which removes power from a colleague and places it with themselves while simultaneously inuring the self-esteem, self-confidence and reputation of the person they target. That is not what we are discussing here. Here we are talking about an adversarial approach, one in which your colleague introduces enmity into their relationship with you in such a way that it erodes trust and reduces the level of support between you. It also results in your relationship becoming transactional rather than co-operative or collaborative. But I don't think that the motivation of the adversarial colleague is to remove power from you, per se.

So what is it about?

An adversarial colleague is one who uses behavior which erodes trust at work while introducing a level of personalised enmity into a working relationship.

Adversarial Behavior: A Misguided Attempt to Feel Safe

As I see it, your colleague uses an adversarial approach in a misguided attempt to feel safe. Your co-worker wants to keep their working relationships devoid of commitment and trust, loose and ill-defined because they think that this way of working is the best way of preventing a situation in which they are vulnerable at work.

In their minds, keeping you on your toes, preventing collegiality from forming between you and handling their interactions with you as a series of separate and discrete transactions prevents them from placing themselves, as they see it, at risk. At risk of being let down, being lulled into a false sense of security, at risk of trusting you and finding out too late that it is a mistake to do so.

It's more comfortable for them to keep things between you transactional and untrusting. It's more comfortable for them to demonstrate lower than average levels of workplace responsibility and commitment towards you. It's more comfortable for them to maintain unclear boundaries in their relationship with you. They'd rather take this approach—no matter how uncomfortable it is for you—as opposed to a more trusting and supportive approach because it precludes them from placing themselves in a vulnerable position by giving you room for manoeuvre which you could misuse or exploit, or by somehow allowing themselves to lose control or otherwise be exposed.

They'd prefer you adjust to their values whenever you two work together—whether or not this way of working comes naturally to you or results in effective outcomes for their employer—because it meets their internally generated need to remain separate and detached, and, therefore, to their minds at least, safer. A truly adversarial colleague places their personal need to devise loose and ill-defined relationships above their responsibility to build mutually effective workplace connections and above their role requirement to collaborate effectively with their colleagues on behalf of their employer. And they do so despite the fact that this way of handling things inevitably backfires on them in both the short and long runs.

Depending on how far they let their adversarial instincts drive their behavior, and depending on how frequently they do so, the conduct of an adversarial colleague can come across as duplicitous, irresponsible, uncommitted and downright provocative. In and of itself this is difficult enough to deal with. But add to this a desire to purposefully act against you every now and then, for any number of reasons, and you have the profile of a co-worker who can be a complete nightmare to work with.

Many adversarial colleagues don't recognise the pivotal role which their own conduct has played in creating the dynamics which come back to bite them.

Degrees of Adversarial Behavior

However, not all adversarial colleagues prove to be a constant and total pain in the neck. Some display quite moderate traits in comparison to the description given above, and use less marked and more infrequent adversarial behavior. Others again may demonstrate adversarial and oppositional tactics with some colleagues only or in relation to some workplace issues only and not in relation to others. However, it is highly likely that, whatever the degree of opposition they promote around the workplace, most adversarial colleagues will greatly contribute to setting up the very sets of circumstances which they most want to avoid.

The Boomerang Returns

By acting in an untrustworthy and ambivalent manner towards some or all of their co-workers adversarial colleagues inevitably set up dynamics in their workplace relationships which involve constant low level resistance, simmering antagonism or escalating hostility. They inevitably set some of their working relationships up to fail. They promote disagreement and conflict at work.

They find themselves left out of decision-making and problem-solving loops. They lose influence and goodwill around the workplace. Their reputation includes contention and it undermines their credibility. They discover that some or many of their colleagues don't want to involve them in their work groups and processes or, sometimes, don't want to work with them at all. Consequently, they do feel exposed at work, they don't know what is going on and they might even feel exposed and unsafe. And, sadly, many truly adversarial colleagues can conclude that it is they who are being ill used by their colleagues.

Many adversarial colleagues don't recognise the pivotal role which their own conduct has played in creating the dynamics which come back to bite them, and they don't readily get that if they took a different approach they wouldn't reap these particular outcomes. Blind to their own inherent untrustworthiness, they blame their colleagues, regarding their conduct towards them as yet more proof of their basic assertion that most people are untrustworthy and unreliable and need to be handled as such. They continue with their transactional methods and fail to appreciate that they are perpetuating the very sets of circumstances which they want to avoid, circumstances which would not occur if they adopted a more customary workplace approach characterised by some degree of trustworthy and supportive behavior.

The Challenge of Working with an Adversarial Colleague

Those of you who are basically non-adversarial in nature may well be quite baffled by the behavior of your adversarial colleagues. You might think it a contradiction in terms for any colleague to regard another colleague as an adversary. Surely you're on the same side? Working for the same outcomes? Employed by the same organisation?

Well, yes, you are.

But your adversarial colleague doesn't see any contradiction in placing the concept of "colleague" alongside the concept of "enemy." You probably do and might experience such a colleague as a major drain on your energy and resources. But they don't have a problem with their conduct. And, unfair though it might be, it is up to you to find effective ways of handling your colleague so that you don't end up thoroughly hacked off and rendered ineffective whenever you work with them.

You may well wish that your adversarial colleague would change their stripes for spots and become easier to deal with. But in reality they are unlikely to acquiesce to your wish and you'd be wiser putting your energy towards finding productive ways of handling their more awkward traits so that working with them becomes less stressful and less difficult. And in doing so you need to remember that you are dealing with a colleague who is not naturally cooperative or likely to want to work with you, not motivated to establish rapport with you, unlikely to respond to any openness you extend to them with openness of their own, not minded to use supportive or trusting behavior and is largely blind to the benefits of establishing fruitful connections with you or anyone else at work.

So, how do you go about working with such a character? Here are some pointers towards working more safely and less stressfully with an adversarial boss, an adversarial peer and an adversarial team member.

Working Effectively with an Adversarial Boss

Having an adversarial boss is a situation which is fraught with a series of pitfalls, hazards and misjudgements which you could make as you negotiate the double whammy of your manager's organisational authority and their oppositional nature. You might have a boss who uses their position to undermine you or to play you off against your peers. You might have a boss whose management style includes regular demonstrations of raw power and a failure to extend any or much support to you even when you need it to progress issues which matter to *them*. You might have a boss who expects consistently top performance from you but who then actively removes the tools you need if you are to deliver against that expectation. Or you might have a boss who actively creates obstacles which make it more difficult for you to achieve the standard of work you'd like to produce.

Then again, your boss might be highly wedded to their own opinion and to getting their own way, even in situations where they don't have much skill and are not that well informed. Or your boss may, quite simply, have lost the ability to say "good job!" even when you excel. Your boss might be intimidating towards you and consistently act in untrustworthy ways, ways which inevitably make it harder for you to do the job you are paid to do. Your boss might regard their organisational power as an extension of themselves and use it to reinforce their status whenever they feel the need. In fact, your adversarial manager may adopt these approaches on a repeat basis regardless of how they impact you or your work, and regardless of how effectively you are performing, have performed or are likely to perform in the future.

Working for a manager like this can be taxing and wearing, especially if you have previously only worked for non-adversarial managers or for managers who use their influence to get things done rather than to reinforce perceptions about their own power.

You might be confused by your adversarial boss's motives. You might be uncertain about what they think they will gain through doing things this way. You may simply not get it and, because you don't get it, you may mishandle your boss and inadvertently take a misstep.

What you need to know is this.

Many adversarial managers test their team members' resolve on a regular basis. They do this because they want to know how able you are to stand up to them under pressure. They want to know how robust and well-defended you are and how self-confident and autonomous you are. They want to know how far they can push you before you give in and how well-equipped you are to stand up to them respectfully. They want to know to what extent you will stand by your own judgements, opinions and points of view, and remain committed to them when questioned or challenged by an authority figure. And, in acting like this, either consistently or intermittently, your adversarial manager may be guilty of failing to respect the boundaries around your work and failing to offer you any useful support. They may be guilty of actively mistrusting you despite plenty of evidence about your competence at your job, and they may be guilty of tactically introducing behavior into their relationship with you which is designed to keep you on your toes and remind you of who is in charge.

Given this mindset you also need to know this.

The keys to working with a truly adversarial manager lie in realising that they are unlikely to change and that you shouldn't try and change either. You would do well *not* to use your energy trying to win the approval of your adversarial boss. They are highly unlikely to bestow it. They don't want to build bridges with you. They don't want to establish rapport with you. Or liking. Or trust. They don't want to have to deal with your need to be approved of or your preference for their support or your wish for their active interest in your work. Your adversarial manager will not be open to amending their methods and adopting either a less oppositional or a non-adversarial approach no matter how well you put your feedback to them on these topics.

They don't want to change. They like being like this. They choose to be like this. And they are likely to regard the fact that it's tricky for you to work for them as irrelevant to them. To their mind, that's your problem not theirs.

So, don't waste your time and effort trying to change your adversarial boss into a non-adversarial boss or a less adversarial boss. And don't fall into the trap of making sweeping changes to the way you handle yourself at work or how you go about your duties either. You don't have to change just because your boss doesn't respond the way you expect, are used to or like. Instead, use your energy to protect yourself from their adversarial traits and to reduce the opportunities they have for working against you. The following pointers will show you how. They are predicated on the idea that you want to remain in your job, are good at it and that you want to find ways to minimise the wear and tear associated with working for your adversarial manager.

Firstly, you need to concentrate on doing your job as effectively as you can. Don't get side tracked into worrying about what your boss might do next or how they might be planning to act against you. Focus your mind where it most needs to be: on doing your job to the best of your ability. This is the most responsible thing you can do when working with an adversarial boss. It is responsible towards yourself and your employer (assuming that this person is someone other than your boss), and it is also responsible towards your undeserving boss although they are unlikely to thank you for it.

Keep on doing your job as effectively, thoroughly and competently as you have always done it. This approach will not preclude you becoming a target for your boss's adversarial traits but it will preserve your integrity. It will preserve your self-respect as you choose to go down your own path without letting your boss's adversarial tactics take you down the alternate path of shoddiness, slackness and slipping standards. And it will enhance your reputation in the wider organisation as your colleagues observe you remaining committed to your principles under pressure.

Secondly, respect the fact that your boss is still the boss. You don't have to respect or like their *conduct*. But you do need to respect their *office*. This person is still your boss whether or not they behave in ways you like and respond favourably to. Make a distinction between the role they play—that of being your manager—and the way in which they carry out that role. You don't have to like the latter but you do have to show some degree of deference to the former. If you can't, then leave and look for another role with a boss you can respect. If you stay, make it your job to respond promptly and fully to your manager's requests and requirements of you without looking for opportunities to provide them with feedback on their behavior. A truly adversarial manager won't welcome feedback at all, even after sustained excellent performance from you.

You would do well not to use your energy trying to win the approval of your adversarial boss. They are highly unlikely to bestow it.

Thirdly, adopt a specific style of managing your boss, one which means that you don't react to their adversarial behavior and lose your focus but instead choose to handle them effectively even under pressure. Expect them to be difficult to deal with. Expect them to be awkward and oppositional. Expect them to be unable to say "thanks," unable to give you due credit and largely uninterested in your concerns. Instead, make it your job to understand what they are trying to achieve on a project and then purposefully add value to their plans and proposals whenever and wherever you can. Disagree carefully with them when you need to by suggesting alternative ways forward that they might want to consider. Give them advance notice of upcoming issues which you think they need

to be informed about. Ask them if they are open to an additional way of looking at things and only offer your version of events if they are.

In other words, demonstrate to them that you choose your behavior. They don't. And demonstrate to them that you remain committed to doing your job to the best of your ability, despite the provocation. And demonstrate to them that you are an asset to the organisation. Again, don't expect this approach to reduce the amount of flak you get, although it might succeed in achieving this unintended aim. Do it because it is how you choose to handle things. Do it because it reflects *who you really are*.

Fourthly, make it your job to tell your boss *what you really think*. Avoid the trap of saying what you think your adversarial manager might want to hear. Avoid the trap of reacting to your boss's oppositional streak with an oppositional streak of your own. Don't give a view to which you are not committed and which you have not thought through properly simply because you feel the need to say something in the presence of someone who is intimidating and unpredictable. Handling things in these ways will leave you vulnerable and open to attack. Instead, say what you think and why you think it. It's much safer in the long run. Your boss may not agree with you but they cannot doubt your resolve. You will lose far less if you handle things this way than if you try and comply with your boss or strike back at them or object to their methods or try and change their nature, each of which represents a far more risky tactic to employ with a truly adversarial manager.

There is probably no way to feel completely without risk when working with a strongly adversarial manager. But you can maintain your dignity, place yourself at less risk and still do your job to the best of your ability.

Working Effectively with an Adversarial Team Member

You recognise that you have an adversarial team member in the team you manage and you find their behavior baffling. This team member reports to you and is by no means an easy team member to have. At once truculent, even rebellious, there is often something worthwhile in what they say, but it's *how they say it* that isn't ok. Your adversarial team member is chippy, unhelpful and contradictory. For instance, you realise that this team member needs input from you to enable them to make progress on a particular task but they won't accept either guidance or offers of support from you when you approach them. Or, *they* realise that they need direction from you to help them clarify their priorities or resolve certain issues but they prefer to struggle on and fall behind the deadline than admit they don't know and ask you for input. So they stall and make it appear that they are busy while actually they are becalmed. This team member appears to you to be thoroughly confused and confusing and it's beginning to affect their relationships with the wider team too.

Team meetings are not as productive as they used to be. Your adversarial team member disagrees a lot with you or their other colleagues. They take meetings off course and waste valuable time and resources. And their timing is off too. They bring up important issues right at the end of team meetings instead of at the start and seem unconcerned that this inevitably results in the meeting running over or in the issues being insubstantially debated. You've spoken with them about these and other unhelpful traits many times before and while they say "sure, I'll do it differently from now on," when it comes down to it they don't. There is never anything you can really put your finger on which conclusively demonstrates that something is amiss with your team member but the suspicion remains in your mind that there is something seriously off kilter with them and you want to know what it is.

Basically, you are dealing with a team member who is ambivalent towards authority and this characteristic is primarily affecting their relationship with you. However, depending on their makeup and the degree of ambivalence they display, it could also be affecting their dealings with every one of their team colleagues too. The issues you have with their behavior at work would be quite understandable if your adversarial team member really was rushed off their feet or genuinely did forget to get something done on time or did make an honest mistake. But you are not convinced. You worry that their failure to deliver is actually quite purposeful. You think it is a choice on their part, a baffling one if you think about it, but a choice nonetheless and one which they disown when you question them about it. Whenever you call them on their problematic behavior, pointing out what you regard as a clear pattern of repeated instances, your team member is quick to counter with a ready excuse, explanation or justification, all of which lessen their offence and reframe it as an oversight, an unintended error or even as an overreaction on your part. You just can't get them to take responsibility for their counterproductive approach and agree to use different behavior. You leave each of these futile conversations feeling defeated and annoyed.

Here's what you need to know.

Your team member is in the main blind to their own motives. They simply don't recognise that their unhelpful behavior is largely driven by an unconscious opposition to authority. They don't recognise the pattern of behavior which you can see well enough. They don't comprehend that this behavior pattern is of their own volition and results in them, among other things, provoking disagreement with you and trying to thwart you or their team colleagues. They don't understand that when they take a path which blocks progress and controls meetings they do so chiefly from a desire, however unconsciously derived, to oppose and resist. And they do this for the predominant reason that it enables them to oppose and resist authority. Your authority.

The more you try and tackle their behavior at face value, confronting the behavior itself as opposed to the *underlying motivation which creates the behavior*, the less likely it is you will get to the bottom of it. In fact, a truly oppositional team member is likely to be highly skilled at obfuscating, justifying and dodging whenever you bring up the topic of their unhelpful conduct. They might respond by pointing out the flaws as they see them in *your* management style.

They might complain about their team colleagues' perceived faults. They might change the point of the conversation away from their own unhelpful shortcomings and onto ways in which you could facilitate team meetings more effectively. Or manage the group more productively. Or anything else for that matter. And you can quickly find yourself chasing your own tail and losing sight of the reason you called the meeting in the first place, which was to confront your team member about their counterproductive conduct and get a clear commitment from them to use a more useful approach.

So, what do you do?

Well, provided that you tackle their underlying motivation in the right way, it's actually quite simple. Let's start by discounting certain things. Your job is not to describe what they have done that was counterproductive and then describe how it wasted everyone's time. You've tried this approach before and it didn't work. Nor is your job to point out the deficiencies of their current behavior and demand they use an alternative method. That won't work either. Your job is not to haul them over the coals either. No. Your job is to point out to your adversarial team member the consequences for them if they continue to use their current ambivalent and oppositional approach, and leave them with a clear choice about what they could do next. Your job is to "name the game" they are playing—the game they are either largely or completely blind to—and make it clear that you know exactly what is going on even if they have so far chosen to overlook it. Your job is to hold up a mirror to their conduct so they can see how they are coming off and then let them choose to continue down this path with all its unpleasant consequences for them or choose another path instead.

But, the way in which you do this and the tone which you use when you have this conversation are vital. Here are some pointers.

Firstly, the goal for this meeting is to give your team member the chance to amend their ways. It is not a meeting set up to allow you to vent your frustration with them, no matter how understandable that frustration might be. The meeting is not going to go well if you get angry. Don't lay into them making it hard for them to hear your message. Don't have a go at them because you are cross that they have disrespected your authority. Instead, rise above all that and simply say what you have to say and leave it at that.

Secondly, don't sound apologetic or uncomfortable about giving them a clear choice. A choice is a choice, and this is their choice. It's their career and their behavior, and they are responsible for the consequences of their conduct at work. Your adversarial team member needs to hear it straight and the most enabling and generous thing you can do is to give it to them straight.

Your job is to point out to your adversarial team member the consequences for them if they continue to use their current ambivalent and oppositional approach, and leave them with a clear choice about what they could do next.

Thirdly, use clear, simple, unambiguous language. Simply point out that their reputation both inside and outside the team, and with you, is being harmed by their ambivalent approach and tell them that you think they have much more to offer than is coming across. Say that you would like to see them making the most of the talent they have by ceasing using ambivalent and oppositional behavior, ceasing rebelling against your authority and ceasing injuring their own credibility by doing so. Then be silent and let them take it in. For a truly oppositional team member this may be their first encounter with an authority figure who has their best interests at heart. Let them digest what you say and process it for what it means to them before you speak again. Don't be afraid to let the silence go on a while before you judge the moment right to carry on.

Of course, to do all this you do really have to believe in your team member. You really do have to think that they have talent and you really do have to want them to use that talent productively. And assuming that you do, here's an example of how to handle your all-important conversation with them.

Set it up as a one-to-one between the two of you at which to specifically deal with the issue of their progress in their role. Before the meeting identify a specific incident around which to build your feedback. In the meeting describe what happened in as full and factual a way as possible outlining exactly what it was that your team member said or did that backfired so unhelpfully on them. It's important that you describe this incident as precisely as possible so that they cannot dodge the issue or question the validity of your perception. Use the words they used at the time in your description of the events. Describe exactly what they did at the time so they recognise themselves. This makes it much more difficult for them to obfuscate or claim you are mistaken.

Then make a direct link between what they said or did and the fact that you two are now having this conversation. Tell them what consequences they are creating for themselves by using this approach. Spell it out. Tell them that they are damaging their own reputation. Tell them that they are making it impossible for you to consider them for promotion or for work alongside more senior or influential managers or whatever it is.

Make clear what the direct unpleasant consequences for them will be if they continue to use this approach. Only you as their manager can decide what form these consequences will take, and you need to use a tone which conveys that you really do mean what you say. Your team member must believe that you will act if you need to. It is the expectation that they will be in trouble if they continue to act in an adversarial and oppositional manner which will motivate most adversarial team members to amend their ways. Remember, they might not, up until this moment, have recognised their behavior for what it is. But they have still chosen to handle things this way and they can just as easily un-choose and make another choice instead.

Those of you who manage a truly adversarial team member have a real opportunity here. Of course, your team member might have hacked you off so much that the kind of generosity of spirit described here escapes you. You may simply not want to invest in them to the extent advocated here. But assuming that you do, and assuming that you can muster the goodhearted strength of character you need to give your team member the feedback they need to hear in a way in which they can hear it, you may just be the catalyst for a changed life. You may just succeed in giving your ambivalent, oppositional team member an opportunity to act out of a better, higher version of themselves, one characterised by the fruitful use of their talents and skills, and one marked by wiser and more productive choices. You may just succeed in helping your erstwhile truculent and rebellious team member to take the first steps to becoming a more satisfied, effective employee and a more contented, happier person. The choice is yours. And it's theirs too.

They have still chosen to handle things
this way and they can just as easily un-choose
and make another choice instead.

Working Effectively with an Adversarial Peer

You have been assigned to work with an adversarial peer on a joint piece of work. Your heart sinks. You two are peers: you have no organisational authority over your tricky colleague and you cannot give them instructions nor tell them what to do. In fact, your past experience of working with this particular peer leads you to regard them as someone who will renege on agreements and handle their affairs in a shoddy way without giving it a second thought. So you cannot sensibly expect them to adopt a collaborative or even a co-operative approach to working with you this time round.

You expect your peer to be ambiguous and complicated to deal with. You daren't leave them to get on with the part of the work assigned to them for fear that they either won't do it at all or won't do it well enough. But then again you can't really hover over them and check up on what they are doing all the time either. You don't trust them and you fear that, given their adversarial mindset and oppositional way of doing things, you will have little influence with your peer at any stage of your work together. Nevertheless, you have to find ways of working with them which result in the work being done, being done to standard and being done in a way which doesn't result in you incurring reputational risk through working with them.

The challenge you face is how to minimise the risk associated with working alongside your peer given their untrustworthy streak and the likelihood that they will take advantage of any latitude you give them. The key tool available to you as you prepare to handle this situation is the judicious management of the boundaries between your peer and their involvement in the work. Put simply, you need to take control of the situation and decide which specific tasks your peer will undertake in what areas of the project and when so that you reduce the opportunities open to them for misbehaving.

Here's what you need to do.

Firstly, you need to get into gear early. Don't wait. Cease control of the situation straight away. It may take more of your energy than usual to adopt this super-alert mental state from the off but it will be well worth it for the peace of mind and professional safety it will bring you.

Secondly, decide what you need to do to retain as much control as possible over two sets of circumstances: 1. the process of the work and 2. the factors which you consider to be central to you achieving your goals for the project. Deciding how to do this may take some considerable upfront thinking on your part but it is vital that you do it to protect your interests. You may decide that your adversarial peer is trustworthy with regard to some aspects of your joint work but not others. Or you may consider them to be a liability in most if not all areas of the work. Whatever your view, having decided how much latitude you want to give your peer over which issues you then need to decide exactly how you will arrange the boundaries between them and the key tasks you want them to accomplish each step of the way.

In practice this means making conscious decisions about what information you want your peer to have access to, which tasks you will ask them to take on board single-handedly, which meetings to include them in, what role you will play in each of those meetings, what latitude you will extend to your peer for acting independently of you or making decisions without your input, which problem-solving processes to include them in, which colleagues they will liaise with an over what and, of course, which responsibilities you want them to handle. And all of this is predicated on you being willing to assume the mental lead, totally, before your peer decides to take control of the project. And for added bite, you might want to enlist the support of your manager to a documented version of these boundaries before running them past your adversarial peer. This move will enable you to tell your peer, should you need to, that the way of working you are advocating has already been approved from above.

Carefully management of the boundaries around your adversarial peer's involvement with the project is primarily about giving them specific, clear messages about the extent to which you are prepared to extend trust to them. But it is also about clarifying what input you expect to receive from them within these areas, as well as the way in which you expect them to handle themselves while working with you and how you will handle them should they overstep the mark.

Thirdly, throughout the life cycle of the project, you need to demonstrate consistent resolve in enforcing the boundaries you commit to should your peer decide to overstep the mark to see what gives. And you can be sure that, at some point or other, they will do exactly that. This last part is crucial. Placing effective boundaries around your adversarial peer's involvement makes it possible for you to protect your interests. But all your hard work will be for nothing if you fail to enforce your boundaries each and every time your peer steps over the line.

And they will.

It's in their nature to push the boundaries to see how committed you are to them. And it's vital that every time they do so you find the resolve to push back so that your peer gets the consistent, clear message that you are quite resolute in your wish to actively manage the process of the joint project, and quite prepared to challenge their counterproductive behavior each and every time it becomes necessary to do so.

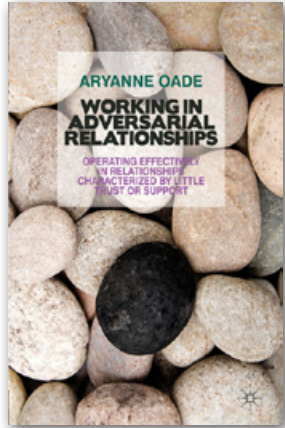
Once again, you are dealing with someone else's will here. And your peer's will is set towards making a nuisance of themselves whenever they want to. There isn't a foolproof plan for eradicating your peer's tendency to use counterproductive behavior. But shrewd management of your boundaries is a prudent way of minimising the risks associated with working alongside an adversarial peer and ensuring that you, not they, remain, as much as is possible, in the driving seat of the project.

The Last Word

In your dealings with an adversarial manager, team member or peer the temptation may be to take the easy route and compromise with them or accommodate to them on some or all occasions. You may think that taking the path of least resistance is the favourable option if the alternative is the energy-sapping one of managing your boundaries and confronting your colleague's adversarial conduct day in, day out. You could compromise or accommodate on some occasions but if these are your only strategies you really need to think again. These strategies represent false economies which are likely to back fire on you in the end, losing you influence and adding to your pressure not reducing it.

At the end of the day you choose your attitude. You don't have to be finagled into taking a path which isn't in your highest, best interests especially, as in this case, when the stakes are too high to warrant it. The better path to take is the path which, while it involves some hard work on your part, will help you manage the stress of working with an adversarial co-worker. Exercising wise judgement about what to confront and when will, while resolutely managing your boundaries, will get you farther in the long run and will preserve your integrity.

I hope that this manifesto has given you some clear suggestions about how to work effectively alongside an adversarial mindset—and I hope that reading it has resulted in you becoming better equipped to go back to work and handle your adversarial colleagues with greater skill, confidence and resolve. **Best of luck.** 📧



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Aryanne Oade is a Chartered Psychologist, author, coach and workshop facilitator, and combines business psychology and professional acting in her coaching and development projects. Aryanne worked for three consultancy firms before setting up her coaching and development business in London in early 1994. She now lives on a non-commercial farm in Yorkshire from where she runs her business. Aryanne equips executives, managers, business owners and people at work with the skills they need to handle challenging workplace contacts effectively, build their profile, gain greater influence at work and perform more effectively in their roles. Aryanne is the author of *Managing Politics at Work*, *Managing Workplace Bullying*, *Building Influence in the Workplace*, *Working in Adversarial Relationships* and *Starting and Running a Coaching Business*.

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This document was created on December 8, 2010 and is based on the best information available at that time.

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