

How to collaborate with people you don't trust

Lawyers often find themselves in professional situations where demands are high, but trust levels are low. Here are tips on how to navigate them from workplace expert Michelle Gibbings.



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Trust is the backbone of any strong relationship, but what if every effort to build trust – open communication, assuming good intent, active support – has failed?

When you need to find a way to work together with someone despite lack of trust, taking a strategic approach puts you in a stronger position.

TIP 1: ACCEPT THE REALITY

Acknowledge your feelings of mistrust – it is a natural response to circumstances or past experiences. However, do not let these feelings affect your judgment or professionalism.

Emotional intelligence is crucial in managing complicated relationships. It involves recognising your emotions, accepting your feelings and understanding their impact.

Strong self-awareness makes you better placed to determine how to respond strategically, rather than letting emotions dictate your actions. Remember that your professional success requires you to find ways to navigate complex and challenging relationships.

TIP 2: OWN YOUR PART

A strategic approach starts with challenging yourself to examine how

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trustworthy you are in the context of a relationship. For example, do you deliver on your commitments in a way that makes you reliable? Do you own up to your mistakes so that you are accountable?

If you are perceived as untrustworthy, improving the relationship starts with uncovering, acknowledging and accepting the part you have played and what you might need to do differently.

TIP 3: ESTABLISH BOUNDARIES

Do not wait for the other party to set the boundaries for your working relationship – be proactive.

Start by identifying what is most important to you. This step helps determine the boundaries that align with your values and goals. This approach is not about isolating or excluding the other person. Instead, it is about defining what is okay and what is not okay in your particular circumstances.

If you need to decline a request that does not align with your priorities or exceeds your capacity, be clear on why you are saying “no” and deliver the message positively. Position the boundaries clearly and professionally, while keeping the door open for future involvement.

TIP 4: STAY FOCUSED AND CONSISTENT

When trust is lacking, it is easy to get caught up in emotions. Instead, shift focus to the task at hand and concentrate on the shared goals and objectives.

For example, if you are jointly working on a project, specify what each of you will do to complete the task. Being

clear on the task and what is required can help create a sense of purpose and direction, reducing the emphasis on personal differences.

In all your interactions, strive for professionalism and consistency. If you constantly shift your behaviour and are inconsistent, it sends a message that you are hard to trust.

Despite your differences, there is also likely to be some common ground. It could be a shared interest or a mutual acquaintance. When you find common ground, it is easier to recognise the similarities rather than focusing on differences. This approach elevates connection, making it easier to work together.

TIP 5: LEVERAGE THIRD-PARTY SUPPORT

If, even after continued effort, the situation is deteriorating, you can consider seeking help from a third party. The benefit of a third party is an unbiased perspective to help clarify misunderstandings and guide the conversation constructively towards a mutually beneficial resolution.

When leveraging the support of a third party, the goal is not necessarily to rebuild personal trust, but to establish ways to work together professionally.

TIP 6: ALWAYS THINK LONG TERM

Your reputation is one of your most essential professional assets. Treat it as such by staying true to who you are and not sidestepping your values. You can never be sure where your career will lead, and you do not want to find your professional ambitions thwarted

by not paying close attention to your reputation.

Working with someone you do not trust is challenging, but possible. Your strategic approach should not be about undermining the other person but about finding a way to work more effectively together despite lack of trust. After all, results matter in the professional world, and this means getting the job done while working with people you do not necessarily trust. ♦

Michelle Gibbings is a workplace expert and the award-winning author of three books, including her latest, *Bad Boss: What to do if you work for one, manage one or are one*. www.michellegibbings.com.au

