

5 questions to help you address diminishing behavior productively

“When we are being nitpicked and undermined, we tend to turn inward and question ourselves. It’s easy to assume that the Diminisher doesn’t value our contribution. In reality, they probably just value their own contribution more. Instead of reading too much into a situation, we can zoom out and take a broader perspective.” — Liz Wiseman

How do you work with someone whose style sucks the life out of you, slowly draining your enthusiasm and even your confidence?

The most common responses to a diminishing colleague — ignoring the issue, venting, complying and stewing in frustration — rarely help your situation or your spirits. What can help you respond at your best? Doing a little thoughtful analysis to get to the root of the issue, rethinking your view of the person, and, with this new lens of the situation, taking steps to improve your working relationship.

These FranklinCovey questions and tactics can get you started.

1. Do the person’s priorities or agenda compete with mine?

What does the other person *really* want? And what do you want? Taking a few minutes to list these things may reveal a common reality: Your goals aren’t aligned — and may even compete.

For example, maybe you’re in operations working on a tricky launch, but a colleague in sales is moving too fast and making promises you can’t deliver on. Or maybe an ambitious colleague is aiming for a promotion and pushing their project, so there’s no time or attention in meetings for your own initiative. Note: If you aren’t sure of the other person’s priorities, ask and learn rather than make assumptions.

What you can try next:

- **Point out to the person that your priorities conflict.** This might allow the two of you to shift blame away from one another and toward the situation. For example:

“Devon, I understand that you’re working to hit your sales goal. But my biggest priority this quarter is launching the new fulfillment system. That might explain why we disagree — we’re focused on different things right now.”

- **If you support their agenda, say so — it may pave the way to a compromise.** If the other person sees you as on their side, they may be willing to support your initiative now in exchange for your support of theirs later, or vice versa. For example:

“Devon, I appreciate your commitment to boosting sales. I want that too — that’s how we grow as a company! But my priority this quarter is launching the fulfillment system so we can more efficiently deliver for customers. Would you be willing to delay any deals requiring custom development for a month while my team pushes for this launch? If so, we should have even more time for special customer needs once the new system is in place.”

And if you don’t support the person’s agenda, perhaps because you believe it’s only self-serving, it’s still worth communicating your priorities. If you can demonstrate that your project would have a visible, positive impact on your company, you may still nudge them toward helping you, or at least getting out of your way.

2. Am I mistaking the person’s passion for stubbornness or some other negative trait?

If someone dominates a discussion or insists on doing something a certain way — a way that you disagree with or that makes your job harder — it’s easy to assume that they’re doing it out of a lack of concern for you or even to spite you. While that’s possible, it’s more likely that their passion is blinding them to what you think or have to offer. This is especially common when someone is pushing an agenda (see No. 1).

What you can try next:

- **Explain to the person how their behavior impacts you.** Just pointing it out might be enough to get them to change. At least it's worth a try. For example, you might say, *"I've noticed that your meeting updates tend to be very detailed — you're so passionate about ideas to help our clients. But it means I often have only a few minutes to share mine. Could we talk through some ways to make space for both of our perspectives?"*
- **Reiterate your goals to the other person.** You can communicate subtle reminders in the course of regular conversations, either as a statement or question (e.g., *"It's important to me to provide fast customer service"* or *"What's going to help us provide fast customer service?"*). At the least, the other person will know what you value and may even come to realize that you both want the same things.
- **Going forward, when you think about the person's troublesome behavior, attribute it to their passion.** While this won't change the situation, research suggests that it can help you change how you see it and reduce your stress.

3. Could a communication gap be causing us to misinterpret one another?

Here are just a few telltale signs that communication is at least part of the problem:

- You're surprised by changes or requests from the person.
- You aren't able to cover everything in meetings with the person — or even get a meeting with them.
- You *think* that you and the person agree on how a project's going, but then you hear a different story from a third party.
- You don't communicate much with them, yet you judge them as incompetent, hypercritical, or out to make your life hard.

What you can try next:

- **Begin your discussions by restating your shared goal.** It may feel repetitive to cover a topic you feel you should both know. But if you feel like you're working at cross-purposes, reorienting around your shared goal can remind you of what you both want. For example, you might periodically start your conversations or meetings with the person by saying, "*Just to help us stay on the same page, our goal with this project is to identify opportunities in this new market segment. And we're doing so by analyzing industry research and interviewing potential clients.*"
- **Add a regular communication touchpoint.** If you're used to negative interactions, you may feel like the last thing you want is *more* communication. But you probably need it. If possible, start by asking for a conversation about what kind of updates you both need (e.g., "*I want to be sure we're both getting the information we need to do this project well. Would you be open to talking through some ways we could share regular updates?*"). Or, if you have ideas, you could take the lead in asking for a weekly 15-minute status call, creating a shared status dashboard, or other method.

4. What agenda, emotions, or personality traits am I bringing to the situation that impact my view of the person?

Are you hard-charging with a lot to say and wondering why your "problem" colleague never speaks up in meetings? Do you see a project as make-or-break for your bonus chances, then get frustrated when your colleagues won't make time for it? Or, are you muttering, "That will never work" about an optimistic peer's new plan, perhaps because it would mean changing a system you've relied on for years?

It's easy to view others as obstacles to your interests while missing how you're contributing to the situation. If you're highly invested or highly resistant, you could be misaligned with their level of commitment — to a point where they may view you as an obstacle to *their* goals.

What you can try next:

- **Be transparent about your approach or level of commitment.** When you open up and say, *“If I seem resistant to this idea, it’s because it would mean changing our process during the end-of-year crunch.”* Then, at least, the other person might appreciate your self-awareness, and that may open the door to collaboration or compromise.
- **Check what the person is willing or able to commit to — and, if necessary, revise your expectations.** If you’ve been wrapped up in your own concerns, do you know what the other person cares about or is willing to give you? It’s worth checking. They may be open to giving more. Or you may learn, for example, that a peer can’t work on your project because they have recently taken on extra responsibilities from a reorganization — information likely to make their unwillingness less frustrating to you.

5. What else could I do to improve this situation?

People often underestimate the control they have in diminishing work relationships, resigning themselves to reduced performance and misery because “that’s just the way the person is.” But you always have the power to do *something*, whether it’s attempting a new tactic or adjusting and trying a previous strategy again. Remember, you don’t have to solve the whole problem — just taking a next step can get you moving in a positive direction.

What you can try next:

- **Change the setting in which you meet with the person.** Some people can be headstrong and opinionated in group situations but become more reasonable one on one. Others experience attention dips in the afternoon or get distracted by frequent interruptions at their desk and may become better listeners in a walking meeting outside.
- **Ask someone you trust for advice on the situation.** You’re not alone. Most likely, others have had similar problems. Someone who also knows the person can provide a fresh view of your situation and may even have tips. Just be sure that you ask in a specific and nonjudgmental way:
“I’m struggling with getting helpful feedback from Genna on the summer campaign. Her feedback is very critical of the plan, but generic. Do you have any advice on how I could draw out more helpful details from her?”
 rather than “How do you put up with Genna being such a pain?”

- **If the problem is intractable and you're not making progress, consider removing yourself from the situation.** With action and time, you can improve the vast majority of work relationships. But if you can't and you're truly miserable, could you avoid the person by saying no to future projects together, shifting teams, or even leaving your company? Before taking an extreme step, ask yourself, *Am I likely to encounter this elsewhere, too?* If so, removing yourself may not be the best choice.