

Introduction

Imagine that you have hired two people, a carpenter and a stonemason, to work on your house. You have a limited budget, and the work needs to be done quickly. The carpenter shows up to work on time, treats you with respect, takes pride in the work, and in general is mature and businesslike. The carpentry work gets done fast and well. On the other hand, the stonemason often shows up late and leaves early, is cranky around you and other workers, leaves tools lying around, and takes much longer to finish the job than expected. The job is completed poorly. Which one of these workers would you want to hire again? Which one would you recommend to your friends?

Just as you expect the people you hire to act and work in certain ways, your employer expects you to act and work the right way. This means acting professionally: being dependable, organized, honest, prepared, and respectful. Professionals always show up on time and when expected, and do not leave early. They do not stretch out their lunch breaks or cut corners.

Acting professionally is not only necessary to keep your job, it's the key to advancing your career. Trustworthy professionals are valued by their employers, and they get a good reputation for working hard, treating everyone with respect, and being honest and dependable. These are the workers companies want to hire and retain. If you consistently demonstrate that you have these qualities, companies might end up competing for your services. That means more prestige—and often more money—for you.

In this module, you will learn what employers expect from their employees, and you will see how acting professionally pays off in many ways.

What are employers looking for?

When you are just starting out in construction, you probably won't have as many skills or as much experience as many of your co-workers. Most companies and supervisors do not expect someone just starting out to be an expert. They do expect you to work hard, be dependable and honest, and treat your bosses, co-workers, and the company with respect. The following are some qualities that employers want to see in their employees:

Dependable: Dependable workers can be trusted to get the job done correctly and promptly. They show up for work every day and are always on time. Dependable workers do what they promise, and are therefore trusted by their bosses.

Work-oriented: To be work-oriented means enjoying your job and taking pride in your work. Because their work is important to them, work-oriented employees believe in giving a day's work for a day's pay. Supervisors respect their work-oriented employees, and will not have much patience with slackers.

Organized: Organized workers have a plan for what they want to do every day. They keep their tools and work areas neat and clean. Being organized and prepared helps to keep the worksite safe and the project on schedule. If half the day is spent looking for a tool or cleaning up after the previous shift, not much new work gets done. Organized workers do not leave their tools lying around where they might trip co-workers or fall into machinery. They do not leave debris in the work area and are careful to properly store or dispose of flammable materials.

Technically qualified: Becoming technically qualified does not happen by accident. Technically proficient workers get that way because they keep up with advances in the industry and are always looking to expand their skills. Technically qualified workers know how to operate machinery safely, and they learn what tools and techniques are needed for a job before they start.

Flexible: The best workers are willing to learn new tasks and try new ideas. Flexible workers pitch in to help no matter what the task. Even boring jobs can be learning opportunities. Supervisors take note of those workers most willing to help out, and they think more highly of them than of those workers who say, "This isn't my job."

Honest: Honest workers are not only personally honest, they value honesty in others. Honest workers call in sick only when they are actually ill, take good care of their employer's property and tools, and do not borrow those items for personal use. Honest workers leave work early only when they have arranged with their supervisor to do so. If they are struggling with a problem, honest workers seek the help of a supervisor and do not just ignore it or try to fix it just enough to get by.

Prepared: The best workers know which tools they are responsible for and keep those tools in good working order. Professional workers know that maintaining their tools is essential to both the job and safety. They check their tools for frayed cords, dull edges, missing or jammed parts, or anything else that might cause an accident. Prepared workers also know how to follow manufacturers' guidelines for using, maintaining, and repairing tools. Supervisors know that those workers who keep their tools prepared for use are workers who are generally well-prepared.

Respectful of the rules: Professionals realize rules are there for a reason, and they always follow those rules. They know that construction sites are full of hazards that can cause injury or even death, so they always wear the right safety gear and follow all safety procedures. Professionals also follow company rules designed to keep the project on time and within budget, because they know that their raises and promotions depend on how well their company performs.

Respectful of the company: Professionals recognize that they represent their company even when they are not on the worksite. They are careful about what they say when they talk about their company. Employers do not want workers who speak negatively about the company. Respecting the company also means taking care of company equipment and using work time only for company-related projects.

Well-groomed and appropriately dressed: Professional workers realize the importance of dressing appropriately for the job. Well-groomed does not mean having to get a manicure or to shave every single day; it means being neat and clean. At the worksite, sloppy dress can be a safety hazard. Long, messy hair can get caught in machinery and untied shoelaces can cause falls. Sloppy dress may also get in the way of wearing special equipment required for certain jobs. Employers feel that workers who take pride in their appearance are apt to take pride in their work.

Did You Know ...?

... that two-thirds of workers who call in sick at the last moment do so for reasons other than physical illness? That more than two-thirds of employers can find patterns in unscheduled absences? Unscheduled absenteeism costs U.S. companies billions of dollars a year in direct costs related to paychecks and in indirect costs from lower productivity and the effect unscheduled absenteeism has on co-workers' morale. A 2007 survey found that personal illness made up only 34 percent of unscheduled absences, while 66 percent were from other reasons such as family issues, personal needs, stress, and what the study called an "entitlement mentality." There may be times you feel justified to call in sick for reasons other than physical illness, but these should be rare. Some reasons are not valid at all: for instance, feeling entitled to a day off because you've put in so much overtime recently.

Two keys to success: Attendance and punctuality

To make a profit and stay in business, construction companies operate under tight schedules. Keeping to those schedules requires reliable workers. If a worker is late or does not show up, immediate adjustments become necessary, which add rapidly to costs. An unreliable crew member affects the entire team.

When supervisors talk about the most common problems they face on the job, two in particular come up: lateness and absenteeism. Workers with reputations for constantly being late or not showing up as scheduled will not get very far in the construction profession, which depends a lot on its employees' reliability. Here are some suggestions to help you achieve an excellent record of attendance and punctuality.

Think about what would happen if all workers were late or frequently absent. Empathy is when you think about the consequences of your actions on other people, and when you can put yourself in another person's place and understand how they feel. It is one of the most critical skills to have at the workplace. Put yourself in your supervisor's shoes: how could you get the job done on budget and on time if workers were always late or just didn't show up? Would you worry about your workers' safety if there weren't enough people around to do the job properly?



Think about your co-workers. It is also important to have empathy for your co-workers. When you are late or absent, they are the ones who have to pick up the slack. It is not fair to them if you are always late or calling in sick when you are not actually ill. Good attendance and being on time are very important factors in workplace safety. Employees who have to work longer hours or do more tasks to fill in for a perpetually late or absent worker might get tired sooner, which can lead to accidents.

Understand when it is OK to call in sick. Call in sick only when you are actually ill. All companies have rules on how their employees can use sick leave. Some companies may allow the use of sick leave for family emergencies, or they may give employees personal leave days to use in case of emergencies. You must learn and follow your company's sick leave policy. If your company has a human resources department, find out how much leave you have and how you can use it. Whether it is sick leave or personal leave, use it honestly. Do not take leave except for a good reason.

Notify your supervisor as soon as possible if you are running late or must miss work. Call your supervisor as soon as you know that you will be late or absent. It is best to call as close as possible to the start of your shift. Unless you are unable to, make the call yourself; do not ask someone else to call in for you.

Keep your supervisor posted if you have to be out for more than a day. Your absence affects scheduling and work assignments, so let your boss know when you will be back on the job. If you know you'll have to miss work in the future due to a non-illness reason (for instance, serving on a jury), let your boss know as soon as possible what days you'll be absent so that necessary adjustments can be made in advance.

Give yourself enough time to get to work. Part of being well-organized is paying attention to conditions that can affect your commute before you set out for work. If you are driving, turn on the radio (or go online if you have access to a computer) to find out the road conditions on the route you normally take. Allow more time to get to work if traffic or weather conditions are causing delays, and find a different route if your usual one is blocked. If traffic does not turn out to be bad and you end up showing up to work early, you'll look good for arriving a few minutes before everyone else!

Go to your supervisor immediately when you are late. Do not try to sneak onto the jobsite hoping that nobody notices. Report to your boss, explain why you are late, and apologize. Take responsibility for your actions.

Remember, good attendance means more than showing up for work regularly and on time. It also means using only the allotted amount of time for your meals or breaks, and it means working until the end of your scheduled shift. If suddenly you have to leave work early, you must still tell your boss before you go, and you must have a good reason (for instance, to attend to an emergency).

Get enough rest. In most construction jobs, you will start your workday very early; therefore, you should not stay up late on work nights. When you get enough rest, you will be alert and able to do your job to the best of your abilities. Do not party on nights before a workday.

A good attitude: The right start

During your schooling and training, you will learn many technical skills. You will fine-tune these skills on the jobsite working with skilled craftworkers. Technical skill is very important to your success in the construction industry, but your attitude is almost as important. Would you rather work with someone who complains all the time and does not treat you with respect, or someone who is agreeable, enjoys working, and treats you courteously? All else being equal, most employers would rather hire an upbeat employee. Workers with a good attitude tend to be the most productive, and they have a positive influence on the entire work crew.



Note

Attitudes are contagious;
is yours worth catching?"

—Dennis and Wendy
Manning

How can you keep your attitude positive? It's not hard to do if you keep a few things in mind:

Be pleasant. The construction industry offers jobs that reward hard work and skill. When you feel good about yourself, it's easy to feel good about others, too. Being pleasant to those around you shows you are approachable and can talk to others, whether they are co-workers or clients.

Take pride in your work and in your tools. No matter what you do on the construction site, take pride in the skills that you have been working so hard to develop. Take pride in the fact you are working hard, period. Let your pride show in every task you do. Do not let pride slip into arrogance, though.

Cooperate. Lend a hand when someone needs help. "That's not my job" shouldn't be in your vocabulary. If you are given a task you do not like, think of it as a way to gain valuable experience or as an opportunity to prove your willingness to help. Any task can be a chance to learn something. When your supervisor asks you to do something you normally don't do, do it without complaining.

Take initiative. When you report to the jobsite, start working on time—do not wait for someone to tell you to start work. Take charge of your job. If you finish a task and have not been told what to do next, ask your boss; part of your supervisor's job is to make sure everyone stays busy.

Accept responsibility. It's inevitable that you will make mistakes. Everyone does. It is important to accept responsibility for them. Do not try to blame someone else for mistakes you make. You must never try to cover up a mistake; doing so could hide a problem that might result in workers being injured or killed. Accepting responsibility is more than just saying "I'm sorry." Instead, explain what happened calmly and clearly. Then work to correct the problem and help get the project back on track.

Have a sense of humor. It's good to have a sense of humor, and it makes the workday more enjoyable. But having a sense of humor does not mean you should become the workplace clown or tell off-color jokes (which many people consider to be sexual harassment). Before you share a joke with your co-workers or supervisor, make sure the joke will not be taken the wrong way. Having a sense of humor means not taking yourself too seriously and being able to laugh at yourself.

How Workers with Negative Attitudes Affect Themselves, Their Co-Workers, and Supervisors

(The first row has been completed to get you started.)

Problem	Effect on Worker with a Negative Attitude	Effect on Co-Workers	Effect on Supervisor
1. Often argues with co-workers about unimportant matters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Everyone avoids this person Has no friends on the job This person becomes more angry as time goes by 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hurts the work crew's morale Makes it hard to communicate, which could lead to mistakes Makes everyone's job less pleasant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wastes time being the referee Draws attention away from more important problems Causes problems with higher management
2. Often is late or absent			
3. Uses obscene or insulting language			
4. Takes credit for others' work			
5. Gossips or spreads rumors			
6. Is lazy, does not pull their own weight			
7. Always blames others for mistakes			

Productivity and quality. Supervisors make sure that quality work is done on time. Site bosses see to it that workers are using the proper tools, equipment, and procedures. Supervisors are always watching to make sure that workers are not wasting time or supplies, and they are always looking for ways to do the job better or more efficiently.

Coordination. Supervisors make sure the project runs smoothly and that work is not delayed. They must schedule workers and tasks so that the different trades do not get in each other's way. Supervisors must also ensure that workers do not have a lot of down time; it is too expensive to have workers idled because supplies have not been delivered.

Cost control. Construction is a profit-oriented industry. To be profitable, a job must come in at or under the budgeted costs. Supervisors make sure that money isn't wasted and that contractors do not over bill and suppliers do not overcharge. Because time is money, supervisors watch to make sure that workers are reporting when scheduled, taking a reasonable amount of time for meals and breaks, and putting in a full day's work.

Leadership. The boss at a construction site is responsible for ensuring that the right materials and tools are available, that the working conditions are safe, and that the workers are doing what they are supposed to be doing. A boss who is a real leader does even more: motivates the workers and makes them feel as if they're important members of the work crew.

You have a much more focused job than your boss does. You work on specific tasks, and you do what your boss tells you to do. By doing your tasks professionally, you can help make your supervisor's job easier. Remember, supervisors have responsibility for all crew members, not just you. Therefore, supervisors who know they can rely on you will come to appreciate you, because they will know they don't have to worry about the job you are doing. Then they can deal with the many other responsibilities that come with their position.

Tips for building a strong relationship with your supervisor

Most supervisors are confident and have strong personalities. They must have these qualities to handle their bosses, workers, suppliers, inspectors, and clients. They must deal confidently with the pressures that come with being in charge.

Not all supervisors belong where they are. Someday, you may have a boss you believe is ineffective. That does not give you the right to refuse to follow your boss's orders; it does give you the opportunity to learn from that boss's mistakes. Even if you don't agree with your bosses, you need to develop good relationships with them.

Here are some suggestions for getting along well with your boss.

Remember that your boss is not the enemy.

- Bosses don't spend most of their day trying to make your life difficult. It is their responsibility, however, to supervise their workers, which means telling them when they do something wrong.
- Don't take it personally if your boss reprimands you, no matter the situation.
- Bosses don't generally single out individual workers, because it's not professional for a supervisor to show partiality for or against any employee.
- Take a moment and think about how you act around your boss. You want your boss to be honest, fair, open-minded, and even-tempered. Do you act that way around your boss?

Respect the boss-worker relationship.

- Your boss is not there to be your friend. There must be some distance between the boss and the worker for their relationship to stay professional.
- Most bosses and workers appreciate that their relationship should be cordial and based on mutual needs.
- If you come across your boss (or your boss's supervisor) outside of work, be pleasant but don't act as if the person is the brother or sister you haven't seen in ten years.

"Friendship's got nothing to do with it."

– *Miller's Crossing*

Offer solutions, not complaints.

- Your boss has authority over you in the workplace. When your boss tells you to do something, you must do it without complaint.
- If you disagree with your boss because you think you have a better way of doing what you've been told, make a suggestion. Instead of griping, "I don't want to do this your way," offer an alternative: "I figured out a way to do this that I think will save time, boss. Can I show you?"
- There might be times when you have a justifiable reason for not following instructions. If this is the case, state those reasons calmly and respectfully.

Be flexible.

- Just because you're learning to be a specialist in one trade does not mean you should refuse to help in others. There's always something new to learn.
- If your boss asks you to help at another task or work at a different site, treat the request as a learning opportunity.
- It never hurts to add to your skill set; you'll command more pay that way, and you'll develop the scope of skills that may allow you to be a boss one day.

Communicate wisely.

- There are times when you should talk to your boss, and times you shouldn't.

"Many attempts to communicate are nullified by saying too much."

– Robert Greenleaf,
management expert and author

- If you want to speak with your boss, especially about something involved, pick your spots carefully. If your boss has had a stressful day, it might not be the best time to ask for time off or a raise.
- Unless the matter is urgent, it's not a good idea to interrupt your boss in the presence of your boss's supervisor or the company's customers.

- Some problems will not wait. If there is a pressing matter you must bring up with your boss in the presence of higher management or the company's clients, interrupt as politely as you can and ask if the boss can step aside for a few moments to help deal with a serious issue.

Follow the chain of authority.

- Another part of acting tactfully with bosses is not going over their heads when you have a problem. Bosses often resent that type of behavior.
- If you have problems with co-workers, you should try to work them out on your own. If you can't, give your boss a fair chance to resolve any problem.
- If it's a major problem, go over your supervisor's head only as a last resort and only if you have a very good reason for doing so. First, check with your company's human resources department, if they have one, before you make a direct appeal to your boss's supervisor.

Deal with your mistakes.

- Everyone makes mistakes; the trick is to avoid them as much as possible.
- When you do make a mistake, admit it, take responsibility, and work to limit any damage. Put your effort into correcting the mistake and less into apologizing for it.
- Do not try to cover up a mistake. Covering up a mistake could create a safety problem for you, your co-workers, or the people who will use what you're helping to build.
- If you admit to the mistake and take responsibility for it, your boss may be angry initially but later will probably respect your honesty. If you try to cover up the mistake and your boss finds out, however, you'll be in double trouble: over the mistake, and over the attempt to cover it up.

"Experience is simply the name we give our mistakes."

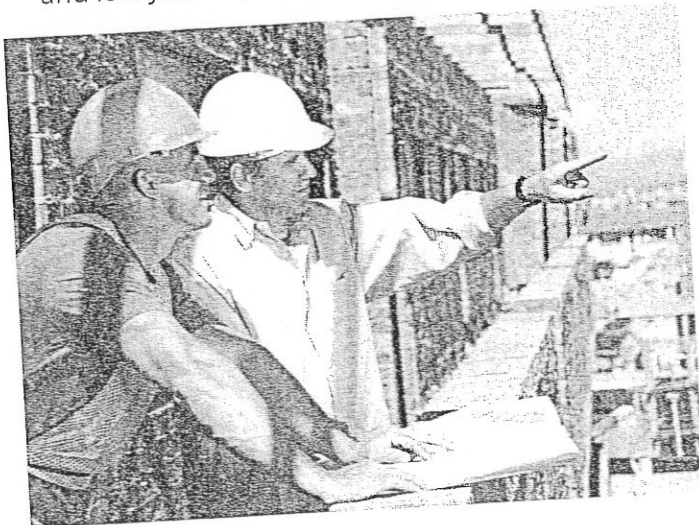
– Oscar Wilde, author

Respect your boss around co-workers.

- It may be tempting to complain about your boss to your co-workers, especially after a hard day. Avoid the temptation. Even if the complaint is in confidence, chances are it will be repeated and eventually get back to your boss.
- If you have a question about your boss's methods, speak to the boss in private. You don't want to undermine their authority in front of the rest of the crew.
- Don't spread rumors about your boss, not only because the boss may find out that you are involved; you need to have enough respect for yourself and others to not repeat rumors.

Empathize, empathize, empathize.

- Empathy is one of the most important skills you can have.
- If your boss is reprimanding you, it may be hard for you to put yourself in your supervisor's shoes. It's important to remember that while you see your job from your point of view, your boss looks at it in terms of how it affects the overall project.
- If you are late, waste materials, or do a poor job, you're having a negative impact on that project, and it is your supervisor's duty to reprimand you and get you back on track.



Be proactive.

- Knowledge may be power, but it's enthusiasm that turns on the switch.
- Showing dedication and eagerness are two outstanding ways to start your relationship with your supervisor on the right track.
- Enthusiasm should be balanced by respect. If you find an error in a co-worker's job, for instance, you might think the best thing to do is go ahead and fix it without talking to your supervisor. A better course of action would be to bring the matter to your boss's attention.

On-the-Job Quiz

Here's a quick quiz that allows you to apply what you've learned in this module. Select the best possible answer, given what you've learned.

1. Your supervisor, who you respect and admire, is moving to another state to take a new job. A few weeks later you meet your new supervisor, who is coming from a rival construction company. You should assume that _____.
 - a. your new supervisor will know next to nothing about the way your company works and you will have to babysit
 - b. the new boss is bound to be a hard case given that your old boss was so good
 - c. your new supervisor is skilled and capable, but probably a bit nervous about starting with a new crew and company, so you should be as helpful as possible
 - d. you'll have to butter up the new boss so that your skills will be noticed and you'll get that promotion you earned under the old boss
2. You've just started a new job, and you like your new, easygoing supervisor. After a couple of weeks of working hard, you start to slack off. You should assume that your supervisor _____.
 - a. will sooner or later casually mention the workplace rules and give you a friendly reminder to follow them
 - b. has many responsibilities and so probably won't notice if you stretch out your lunch breaks or leave early now and then
 - c. will tell you in clear language to straighten up and follow the workplace rules
 - d. is cool and probably feels that as long as the job gets done eventually, a little slacking off is OK
3. It's a quiet Friday afternoon. Everyone is in a pretty good mood because on Wednesday your crew finished a huge job on time and on budget. You have a week of vacation leave, and you want to use it in a couple of weeks to take a trip. Is now a good time to ask your boss for time off?
 - a. No, because you've heard a rumor that your boss doesn't like to be asked for time off, and so you should ask someone above your boss.
 - b. No, because you should make these types of requests on Monday when the human resources office can handle it.
 - c. Yes, because you've earned a vacation, and it's your responsibility to let your boss know.
 - d. Yes, because your boss can more easily spare you some time now that the pressure of the big job is over.
4. You've been on the job a couple of weeks, and your co-workers seem to like to bad mouth the supervisor a lot. You want to get along with your co-workers, but you also want to get ahead. You should _____.
 - a. listen carefully to what your co-workers are saying, then repeat it to a materials distributor you talk to later in the week to verify if there's any truth to what your co-workers were saying about the boss
 - b. avoid bad-mouthing the boss until you've got a good personal reason to do so
 - c. avoid bad-mouthing the boss and treat your supervisor with respect
 - d. be proactive and tell your boss's supervisor about what your co-workers are saying

5. You hear your boss reprimanding a co-worker who left tools out in the rain overnight. You look at the situation from your supervisor's point of view and decide that ____.
- a. strong leadership means chewing someone out every now and then to let everyone know who's boss
 - b. your boss should have privately warned the worker and not humiliated the worker in public
 - c. your co-worker didn't know it was going to rain, it was an accident, so your boss must really have it in for that co-worker
 - d. tools are expensive, and they shouldn't be left out overnight, whether it rains or not, so your boss was justified in reprimanding your co-worker
6. You're reading a blueprint, and it's not making any sense to you. There seems to be a serious mistake in it, but because you're not that experienced, you're not sure. You should ____.
- a. assume that the person who drafted the blueprint knows more than you do, and follow it exactly
 - b. ask your supervisor to look at the blueprint and advise you on what to do
 - c. show initiative, ignore the blueprint, and complete the work according to your own judgment
 - d. tell your supervisor someone made a mistake on the blueprint and that you can be relied on to set these kind of things right in the future
7. You're feeling pretty annoyed. Your co-worker is supposed to relieve you at 4 p.m. Yesterday, you were not able to leave until 4:03, and today it was 4:04 before you could punch out. You're not getting paid overtime, and you resent having to wait. You should ____.
- a. promptly complain to your supervisor by noting that the tardiness is screwing up the boss's careful work plan
 - b. be patient for a day or so and if the problem continues, explain to your co-worker that you need to leave at 4 p.m. each day
 - c. complain to your boss's supervisor, choosing your words carefully
 - d. tell your boss that you are willing to wait till your co-worker shows up, but that you expect to be paid overtime for any time worked after 4 p.m.
8. You're at the grocery store with your family and you come across your boss's supervisor, who is also shopping there. You should introduce your family and ____.
- a. mention how much you enjoy your job, and then be on your way
 - b. offer to help the supervisor carry the groceries to the car
 - c. use this as an opportunity to make yourself known to upper management by talking shop and suggesting some ways to control costs at the jobsite
 - d. mutter hello and then leave as soon as possible because you don't want a co-worker or your own boss to see you schmoozing with upper management, if they happen to be in the store

9. You're talking to your boss about the trouble you're having getting the permits needed to start a job. However, your supervisor keeps glancing out the door and tapping a pencil on a desk piled with papers. Based on the nonverbal cues you're receiving, you should ____.
- a. ask your boss if there's something the matter
 - b. offer to come back later to talk about the problem
 - c. tell your boss that you only need a few minutes and to please listen because what you're saying is important
 - d. close the door so your boss will stop looking at whatever the distraction is
10. Your first week on the job, a more experienced worker tells you to go get a skyhook and not to come back until you find one, asking everyone on the site if need be. Several hours later, you realize that there's no such thing as a skyhook and that the senior workers were playing a joke. Then your boss reprimands you for not staying focused on your job. You should ____.
- a. apologize to your boss but say it wasn't really your fault because your co-workers were playing a joke on you
 - b. start telling others about what irresponsible goofballs those senior workers are and that they ought to know better
 - c. admit to your boss that you were distracted by your co-workers and that you'll stay more focused in the future, and then resolve not to be pulled into a prank like that again
 - d. complain to the company's human resources department about the senior workers who pulled the prank

Do's

Realize that you are not the only one who works hard. When you are busy on the job, it's tempting to forget that others are working as hard as you are. Remember that your co-workers are as dedicated as you are and that you all play important roles in completing the project.

When appropriate, praise your co-workers. Everyone likes to be complimented on a job well done. Tell your co-workers when you're impressed by their work. A compliment costs nothing, and it spreads goodwill. Think of how good you feel when someone compliments you.

Share the credit and take responsibility for mistakes. Nobody likes the person who hogs all the credit when something's turned out well. Share the credit you receive, and you'll gain your co-workers' respect. The flip side of spreading the credit around is taking responsibility for your mistakes. Don't expect your co-workers to cover for you if you make a mistake. Taking responsibility for your mistakes strengthens your relationship with your co-workers.

Recognize the contributions of others. Understand that different people bring different talents and skills to the job. There will always be those who are more skilled than you are and those who are less skilled. Learn from those who are more skilled, and be patient with those who aren't at your level of ability.

Meet your deadlines. Always remember that there are workers who cannot start their tasks until you have finished yours. Complete your work on time. Meeting your deadlines is more than just showing consideration. Construction schedules, which are often tight, are tied to budgets, and work delays can cost your company thousands of dollars. If you don't meet your deadline, your co-workers may not be able to meet theirs, and the whole project gets further and further behind schedule.

Realize everyone can feel stress. People get stressed out over their work regularly. Don't let work stress affect how you treat your co-workers. Don't snap at them or get indignant with them. Remember, your co-workers might be under as much stress, or even more, than you are. Instead of taking your aggravations out on your co-workers, think of them as people you can relate to.

Make a good first impression. Be friendly and act professionally from the start, whether at the start of a new job or the start of a new workday. Starting a new job can be stressful, and the best way to reduce that stress is to make a positive first impression.

A Special Tip: Keep Your Problems at Home!

You can't stop personal problems from affecting how you feel. However, you must try to keep them from affecting your co-workers. If you've had a big argument at home, don't bring negative feelings to work. Your co-workers will not appreciate it if you try to make them your scapegoats. If you feel unable to leave your personal problems behind for the day, ask a co-worker, one you trust, if you can discuss your problems during mealtimes or a break. Remember, you are partly responsible for the mood, safety, and success of your team. When you learn to manage your personal problems, you also boost your performance and your reputation as a valued member of the team.

Don'ts

Don't boast or act like a know-it-all. This behavior will annoy your co-workers. The braggart, the know-it-all, and the loudmouth are usually among the least popular people at the worksite. Who wants to listen to people bragging about how wonderful they are, how many dates they get, how well they can fight, or cook, or dance, or grow petunias? Would you want such people on your team?

Don't gossip about your co-workers. People are entitled to their privacy, and gossip violates that privacy. The rumors spread by gossip are usually false and often malicious. Gossiping can hurt feelings and damage relationships. Gossiping won't help you establish yourself with your co-workers; instead, it makes you look unprofessional and petty. How would you feel if someone was saying nasty things about you behind your back?

Don't put other people down. Don't pick on co-workers. Don't insult their appearance, their intelligence, or anything else. Putting others down doesn't just hurt their feelings, it hurts the whole team and poisons the environment. Before you start teasing or mocking someone, take a hard look at yourself. Is there anything about you that someone could make fun of? If you laugh at others a lot, don't expect much sympathy if they start laughing back at you.

Don't shirk your responsibilities. Work has to get done, and if you are irresponsible and don't do your share, your co-workers will have to pick up your slack. They'll resent it, and they'll be justified. You won't last long on the team if you don't do your part.

Caution

There may be the rare occasion when you have to report the conduct of a co-worker. The co-worker might be doing something illegal or something that is endangering your safety or that of your co-workers. You should report this person, however, only if you are reasonably sure that your supervisor is not aware of the behavior.

Assisting others

At some point in your career, you'll be asked to teach others what you know. Maybe you will have to explain a safety procedure or demonstrate how to operate a piece of equipment.

Training others on the job is an excellent opportunity to build good relationships. Most people appreciate and respect a good teacher—especially if that teacher is well-informed, patient, and understanding. Being a good teacher requires several different skills.

Be aware that everyone learns differently. There are at least four different ways that people learn: through pictures, by reading, by listening to an explanation, or through hands-on experience. Although we use all four styles as we learn, many of us prefer one method to the others; some people learn things more quickly by reading about them, others learn more readily by listening to an explanation. Which one works best for you?

Individual Activities

Activity 1: How Do You See Yourself As a Co-Worker?

The following chart lists behaviors and characteristics that tend to make people unpopular with their co-workers. Some people are greatly upset by some of this conduct; other people might not be bothered as much by that kind of behavior. Some people can't stand gossips; other people might rather be around a gossip than someone who is arrogant. None of these behaviors will win you a popularity contest, but it is the rare worker who never exhibits any of them. Rate yourself on how often you exhibit these behaviors or have these opinions. Rate yourself honestly.

	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
1. I don't like working with others in a team.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. I take myself very seriously.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. I lose my temper easily.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. I want to be the best at everything.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. I hold grudges.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. I show up late for work.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. It's not important to be considerate toward others.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8. I take longer than allowed for meals or breaks.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
9. I like to gossip.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
10. I make other people's business my own.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
11. I'll report on my co-workers' behavior to my supervisor when I think it's necessary.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
12. I don't mind saying or doing things that upset my co-workers.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
13. I'll bad-mouth the company or the boss if they deserve it.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
14. I can't take a joke.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
15. I take credit for others' work.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
16. I tell everyone how talented and skillful I am.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
17. I am sarcastic.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
18. I don't listen to the ideas of others.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
19. I look down on people of other cultures or races.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
20. I don't want to pitch in and help.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
21. I horse around when others are trying to work.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
22. I work harder than most people do.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
23. I don't compliment people.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
24. I have a lot of resentment.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
25. I complain about my job, my co-workers, and my boss.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
26. I manipulate people.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
27. I look down on others because of their sex or age.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Now that you've filled out the checklist, for each behavior or opinion you checked as Sometimes or Often, come up with an action plan to help you improve that particular characteristic. A sample action plan to minimize the habit of gossiping is provided for you to use as a guide.

Action Plan for Improvement

Example

Sample Problem: *I like to gossip.*

Sample Action Plan:

1. Walk away when people start gossiping or bad-mouthing others. Or if I can't get away easily, change the subject.
2. Don't repeat gossip I hear.
3. Keep my nose out of other people's business.
4. Focus on my own work, not on what other people are doing.

Problem	Action Plan
I like to gossip.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Walk away when people start gossiping or bad-mouthing others. Or if I can't get away easily, change the subject. 2. Don't repeat gossip I hear. 3. Keep my nose out of other people's business. 4. Focus on my own work, not on what other people are doing.

When in Doubt, Check It Out... in the Employee Handbook

Your company—whether it is a construction firm or a temporary agency that assigns you to companies—will have policies on what it considers acceptable and unacceptable behavior among its workers. You should become familiar with those guidelines and regulations. These policies can be found in the employee handbook. They cover the expected rules of conduct as well as when a company can discipline—that is, suspend or fire—a worker who does not follow these rules. These rules can cover such topics as:

- Alcohol and substance abuse, as well as policies for substance abuse testing
- Attendance
- Harassment, sexual or otherwise
- Guidelines on the acceptable use of e-mail, the telephone, the Internet, and company equipment and vehicles

If you feel you have been disciplined or fired unfairly, look in the employee handbook. Under what circumstances can an employee file a grievance about it? If you feel you must file a grievance about your boss, you should do it only as a last resort after you have tried your best to settle the matter. If you still cannot resolve the issue, you cannot just go talk to your boss's supervisor about it; that will get you nowhere and just makes matters worse. You must follow specified procedures for filing a grievance, which should be in the employee handbook.

The employee handbook will also have information on other topics such as pay, benefits, and policies for promotion.

Coping with difficult co-workers

Some people exhibit a specific annoying characteristic in much of what they do. They can make a person difficult to handle or be around. Some of these characteristics are listed below:

- **Blamers** refuse to take responsibility for their mistakes. They'll blame anyone who happens to be around instead of admitting that they sometimes make mistakes. To cope with a blamer, point out that blaming accomplishes nothing except to undermine the team and make it harder to get the job done.
- **Braggarts** and **know-it-alls** are always boasting—about their intelligence, their looks, their toughness, and their abilities. They've got the best cars and the most money in the bank. They do the best job and they have all the answers. When braggarts start blowing their horns, agree with them; tell them how much better they are than anyone else. That will catch them off guard and they'll be so shocked to have someone actually agree with them, they'll be speechless—which is something a braggart rarely is.
- **Brown-nosers** are always trying to get in good with the boss, through flattery or constant agreement. Sometimes these people are trying to separate themselves from the rest of the crew because they think they're superior. Sometimes, however, a brown-noser is just desperate; they may really need money, and feel obliged to act that way. If that's the case, try to empathize.
- **Complainers** never find anything that is good enough. If there is nothing to complain about, they'll find something. Complainers aren't interested in solutions. If a complainer is getting under your skin, tell them that finding fault never solved anything.

- **Delegators** are the ones who are always talking about the need to delegate their work, when what they really want to do is avoid having to do it themselves. Don't fall for this trick, even if the delegator's request is polite and reasonable. Tell them you have your own work to do, and that everyone on the team has to do their share.
- **Detailers** can take forever to finish a task. It's one thing to be thorough and careful; it's another thing to obsess over every little thing. If a detailer's slowness is affecting your job, tell the person that while you appreciate their thoroughness, all that fine-tuning is upsetting the work schedule.
- **Dictators** are, in essence, bullies. They harass and intimidate others to get their way, and they don't care about others' feelings. They make demands and give nothing in return. As with all bullies, the best way to handle jobsite dictators is to stand up to them. Be firm, but don't get emotional or angry.
- **Gossips** spread rumors. They are often unpleasant people who try to pit teammates against each other, and attempt to manipulate others for one reason or another. Don't listen to gossips, and don't tell them anything you don't want to be generally known at the jobsite.
- **Hotheads** lose their temper easily. Often they'll be sorry afterwards and even apologize, but the next thing you know, they're flying off the handle again. If you don't like dealing with people who lose their temper, it's best to ignore them and focus on your work.
- **Mood-swingers** are unpredictable; you never know what to expect from them. Some days they're happy as can be; other days, they're miserable. Avoid saying or doing things that might cause these people to react emotionally. Sometimes moodiness can be a sign of depression or mental illness; mood-swingers may not always be able to control their moods.
- **Snobs** expect to be treated better than everyone else. They are similar to braggarts in that way, except that snobs may not be quite as stuck on themselves; they are just less fond of others. If a snob is bothering you, point out that no one gets special treatment on the jobsite.
- **Tattletales** are similar to brown-nosers, but they take it a step further. Tattletales try to get in good with the boss by bad-mouthing others to look good in comparison. Be particularly careful what you say and do around tattletales.

Summary

Conflict may be inevitable, but it can be readily managed. Know when you should handle the situation yourself, when you might want to involve your boss, and when you should just let the matter drop. Many common causes of conflict with co-workers can be avoided. Don't react or get too emotional during a dispute, and stay out of arguments if you can. If you have a dispute with your supervisor, discuss it at a time convenient for them. Make your case calmly and respectfully and don't yell or make accusations; stick to the facts and accept your boss's decision. Always look for solutions to conflict, whether with your co-workers or your boss. Remember that most behaviors you may find annoying aren't done on purpose. You will come across a difficult co-worker on occasion—a bully, braggart, or a gossip, for instance—so it will be to your advantage to know how to interact with difficult people.

Benefiting from constructive criticism

Most supervisors give constructive criticism regularly, because their goal is to help their workers improve. Correcting your mistakes can mean the difference between success and failure or even life and death; therefore, you need to be able to take criticism well so that you can benefit from it and improve your skills. To get the most out of constructive criticism, keep these points in mind:

- **Anticipate criticism and be aware of the source.** It is easier to deal with criticism if you expect it and if you think of it as an opportunity to learn and improve your skills. Keep in mind that your immediate supervisor is responsible for your work.
- **Don't take criticism of your job performance personally.** Recognize that your supervisor is criticizing your mistakes and not you personally. Get in the habit of thinking, "This isn't about me, it's about the job I'm doing, and I can learn how to do that better." Instead of being bothered by your boss's criticism, ask for specific details on what you need to correct.
- **Look at your work from your supervisor's point of view.** Your boss is obligated to criticize workers when their work or behavior on the job is shoddy or poor. Part of knowing how to benefit from constructive criticism is being able to honestly evaluate your work. If your boss gives you an earful about how poorly you did a task or how you need to be a better teammate, you should admit the criticism is justified and then start concentrating on improving your performance.
- **Don't get defensive.** When your boss criticizes you, your first reaction may be to defend yourself, respond sarcastically, or act sullen. Resist those temptations and keep an open mind. Supervisors will think more highly of you if you demonstrate that you can take criticism well. Even if your boss is really chewing you out, hold your temper.
- **Don't make excuses.** You may want to explain your mistake or shift the blame to somebody else. Don't. It is much better to take responsibility for your mistakes and move on.
- **Ask for clarification and specifics.** Some criticism is vague. Don't be afraid to ask questions if you do not fully understand what you did incorrectly. Ask those questions respectfully. Remember that your goal is to improve your performance, not defend your mistakes.
- **State your plan for improvement and carry it out.** There is no better way to impress your boss than to take criticism seriously. Tell your boss what you will do to correct your mistakes. For example, if your boss reprimands you for being late, you could say, "I'm getting a better alarm clock so that I won't oversleep again." You must respond to criticism with not only words but action, so be sure to get that new alarm clock.
- **Don't allow criticism to slow you down.** Remember, it is how you handle criticism that matters. Don't allow criticism to lower your self-esteem. Think of constructive criticism as the boss thinking highly enough of you to analyze your work in the first place.
- **Understand your right to disagree when the criticism is not warranted.** After carefully evaluating the criticism you receive, you may feel it is not justified. Sometimes you are right and the other person is wrong. If you think that is case, offer your side of the story respectfully and clearly, and give examples to support your point of view.

Dealing with destructive criticism

People give destructive criticism for a number of reasons. Sometimes people are rude or inconsiderate of others' feelings. Sometimes people only know how to give destructive criticism because that's all they have ever heard in their lives. People may blurt out hurtful and disrespectful things as they are giving criticism because they let their emotions get the better of them, but then they apologize later. Some people might be aware they are giving destructive criticism but prefer to do it that way, simply because they are not very nice people. When people are leveling destructive criticism at you, there are ways you can handle it so that you don't get upset.

- **Control your emotions while you are listening.** If you respond angrily to the person giving you destructive criticism, that will probably only stir up that person even more, making the situation even more tense or hostile.

- Step back from the situation. If the person pauses, you don't have to answer right away, or you can say something like, "Go on, I'm listening." If you respond calmly and without aggression to those who are hostile and insulting, it might catch them off guard. They might just be trying to rattle or antagonize you. If you keep your cool, they might respond by making more constructive and less abusive criticisms.
- Remember that you can respond constructively to destructive criticism. If there is merit to the criticism amid all the insults, focus on improving and not on how the criticism was delivered.
- Ask the person to give you constructive criticism instead, and tell the person how destructive criticism makes you feel.
- If the criticism is not true or valid, do not dwell on it. Move on.

Example: Your boss has had a frustrating day and yells, "Why can't you do anything right? I have to watch you every minute. You are so dumb!"

Your response: Take a deep breath and calm down. Think. Of course you can do a lot of things right. The boss doesn't really watch you every minute, and you know you are not dumb. You could say, "Instead of yelling at me, take a minute and show me how to do it right."

Giving constructive criticism

Giving constructive criticism is a skill that takes time and patience to develop. To offer criticism that is beneficial and helpful, and to do it without being insulting or hurtful, follow these guidelines:

- **Decide what is worth criticizing.** First off, determine if you should be criticizing your co-worker at all. For example, if a co-worker isn't wearing a hard hat, you should definitely speak up; that is a safety risk. However, if you don't like how a co-worker is installing cabinets, hold your tongue. Work techniques can differ without affecting quality. Avoid criticizing personal preferences, such as in music or politics; these have nothing to do with getting the job done safely and well. Don't criticize someone's appearance unless it affects safety, but if someone's hair, jewelry, or clothing might be detrimental to safety or performance, then you should say so—tactfully.
- **Choose the time and place wisely.** Never criticize people in front of their peers. It will embarrass them and make them resent you. Take them off to the side, and choose a time when they are feeling less stressed or pressured. If the person is having a bad day or is under a lot of stress, and if the criticism can wait, put it off for a day or two.
- **Choose your words carefully.** Don't swear or call people names. Don't sound angry, frustrated, or sarcastic. Stick to the facts and stay clear of personal comments.
- **Criticize the behavior, not the person.** To prevent hard feelings, make it clear that you are criticizing the mistake, not the person. Be specific about what the person has done (or not done). Consider the following example:



Example: A co-worker leaves the jobsite each day without putting tools away.

Destructive criticism: "How many times do I have to tell you to put the tools away before you leave? Can't you understand simple directions? What are you, deaf, dumb, or both?"

Constructive criticism: "It's important to put the tools away at the end of the day. You do need to start doing a better job of that, you know. We insist on that around here, and when tools are not put away, it causes problems for everyone. It only takes a few minutes, and it's a big help to everyone."

2. **Hostile Environment Sexual Harassment:** A hostile environment is created when an employee is subjected to gender-based or sexually oriented unwelcome behaviors, such as comments about physical attributes, inappropriate touching, exposure to offensive sexual materials, or discussions of sexual activity.

Title VII is enforced by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). When the EEOC investigates an allegation of sexual harassment, it looks at the nature of the sexual advances and the context in which those advances occurred. Here's an example of how the EEOC operates.

For example, on April 1, 2009, the EEOC filed a lawsuit in U.S. District Court against a road construction company, charging that the company violated federal law by subjecting a class of female employees to continual sexual harassment, and by retaliating against a woman who complained about the conduct, forcing the woman to resign. The lawsuit alleged that a boss made numerous sexual comments to women employees who were working a highway project, creating a hostile work environment. The lawsuit was filed after the EEOC had tried to reach a settlement with the company.

What is sexual harassment?

According to the EEOC, sexual harassment can occur in a variety of circumstances. These circumstances include, but are not limited to, the following:

- The victim or the harasser may be a woman or a man. The victim does not have to be of the opposite sex.
- The harasser can be the victim's supervisor, an agent of the employer, a supervisor in another area, a co-worker, or someone not employed by the company (for instance, someone employed by a supplier or subcontractor).
- The victim does not have to be the person harassed but could be anyone affected by the offensive conduct.

For unlawful sexual harassment to occur, it does not require economic injury to the victim nor does it require a threat to the victim's job.

Only unwelcome conduct can be considered sexual harassment; if the joking or touching (or dating) between co-workers is welcomed by both of them, this is not considered to be sexual harassment. Conduct is considered unwelcome if the recipient did not initiate it and regards the conduct as offensive. The following behaviors are considered to be sexually harassing at the workplace if they are unwelcome:

Sexual advances or requests for sexual favors. Sexual advances means more than just asking for sex. It also means pestering a co-worker for a date when that co-worker has said no.

The clearest case of unwelcome conduct would be when the employee directly tells the harasser that the sexual advance or other sexually oriented conduct is unwelcome, that the behavior is making the employee uncomfortable, and that the harasser must stop the behavior immediately.

A more ambiguous case is when the offended employee has not been clear about whether the conduct is considered unwelcome. For instance, if you ask a co-worker out on a romantic date and the co-worker mutters, "No, no, sorry, I have a previous commitment," your request probably would not be considered sexual harassment because your invitation wasn't fundamentally offensive and your co-worker's response was too vague to determine whether or not the co-worker considered your conduct unwelcome.

Another case involves co-workers who have been in a sexual relationship when one of them wants to end the relationship but the other does not and is insistent about it. If you have been in a sexual relationship with a co-worker and you want to break it off but your ex-partner does not, and if that co-worker's continuing sexual advances to you at work are affecting your job, then your ex-partner's behavior would be considered unwelcome and therefore sexually harassing. Employees have a right to end relationships with co-workers without fear of retaliation on the job.

Other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature. Sexual harassment can be either physical or verbal. Examples of physical conduct of a sexual nature include:

- Standing so close to co-workers that they feel uncomfortable. This can include leaning over co-workers, cornering them, or gratuitously hugging them.
- Touching a co-worker inappropriately or touching a co-worker who does not want to be touched. This can include pinching and unwanted neck or back massages.
- Making obscene or vulgar gestures, such as smacking lips or touching oneself in a sexual manner.

Examples of verbal conduct of a sexual nature include:

- Making vulgar comments or sounds (such as whistling, howling, kissing sounds, or cat calls).
- Referring to an adult using such words as *girl*, *doll*, *babe*, *honey*, *hunk*, or *stud*.
- Sending unwanted letters, telephone calls, emails, or text messages of a sexual nature.
- Calling co-workers by sexually offensive names.

Making sex or sexual favors a term or condition of employment. Demanding sex from someone in exchange for keeping a job or getting a promotion is an example of *quid pro quo* sexual harassment. The definition of *term or condition of employment* is not just limited to a boss-worker situation, however. If a worker takes negative action against a co-worker or threatens that co-worker for refusing sexual advances, such behavior is considered sexual harassment even if the harasser is not the victim's boss.

Creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment. Sexual harassment is not limited to requests or demands for sexual favors. It can also be any gender-based offensive behavior that makes the workplace threatening or offensive. In a sexually hostile environment, unwelcome conduct is abusive to the victim. It is best to prevent a sexually hostile environment from being established by avoiding these behaviors in the first place. Some examples of behaviors that create an intimidating working environment are:

- Telling obscene jokes.
- Engaging in suggestive sexual talk or sexual innuendo.
- Asking about a co-worker's sexual fantasies, preferences, or histories.
- Telling lies or spreading gossip about a co-worker's sex life.
- Displaying pornographic calendars, cartoons, or pictures.
- Using email to send pornographic pictures, stories, or jokes.
- Using profanity.
- Referring to co-workers using demeaning names or terms.
- Staring at a co-worker's body or making inappropriate comments about a co-worker's physical attributes.
- Stating or implying that co-workers are less competent because of their gender.
- Making personal comments about a co-worker's social or sex life.
- Turning a work discussion into one about sex or sexual topics.

In most cases, sexual harassment involves more than one isolated incident; generally it is considered a pattern of behavior repeated over time. However, sexual harassment can be based on only one incident, and there have been a number of sexual harassment legal actions taken as a result of a single event.

How to avoid sexually harassing others

Often, people accused of sexual harassment honestly do not understand the accusation. They may feel they did not mean any harm, they are not sure what they did wrong, and they are surprised that they're being accused of sexual harassment.

The best way to avoid being charged with workplace sexual harassment is to think carefully about what you do and say around co-workers. You may have to change your behavior or your conversational style. Here are some tips that will help you to avoid sexually harassing your co-workers.

Be a professional. Remember the qualities of being a professional worker. At all times on the job and with everyone, act that way.

Professionals behave with dignity and treat others with respect. Unfortunately, construction workers are sometimes portrayed as loud, rude people who treat others, especially women, badly. Do not let your behavior add to this unfair stereotype.

Don't comment on anyone's physical appearance. You never know how such comments will be received. If you compliment a co-worker's hair, figure, or clothing, that person may be flattered—or that person may be annoyed and wonder what your real intention is. When you make a comment about a co-worker's physical appearance—even if you mean it simply as a compliment—you are stepping onto uncertain ground. If you want to compliment co-workers, by all means do so but stick to work-related characteristics: the good job they do, the positive attitude they bring to team, the consideration they show fellow workers.

Don't use terms of endearment. You may not mean any harm when you call another co-worker *honey* or *sweetie*, but you don't know how these terms will be received.

Think before you speak. Are the people you work with comfortable hearing dirty jokes? Do you think that everyone in the group really wants to hear about your sexual adventures? The best course of action is to avoid off-color jokes and keep quiet about sexually oriented topics.

No means no. Do not assume that a co-worker you are trying to date is playing hard to get if they do not want to go out or have sex with you. If a co-worker won't date you or refuses your advances, then you must stop making those advances and drop the entire issue, or face being subject to a sexual harassment lawsuit.

Remember the empathy rule. How would you feel if you worked in a hostile environment where everyone prejudged you, treated you disrespectfully, or harassed you because of your gender or sexual orientation? Even if you don't find a conduct personally offensive, remember that some of your co-workers might. If you are uncertain whether your behavior is unwelcome, ask yourself these questions: Would I change my behavior if a family member were here? Would I want a member of my family to be treated this way?

Read your company's sexual harassment policy. Most companies have a policy regarding sexual harassment. Read your company's policy and make sure you understand it.

Watch the use of email and text messaging. Don't send out emails from work with suggestive or potentially offensive material in them, even if you're only sending it to people you know won't be offended. Someone might be looking over the recipient's shoulder. The same rules apply to texting.

Prescription drugs

When people talk about substance abusers, they usually mean alcoholics or people who take illegal drugs. However, many people also abuse prescription drugs, sometimes on purpose and sometimes without realizing it. In fact, a 2008 report from the drug-testing company Quest Diagnostics found that more workers are now testing positive for prescription drugs than for cocaine and amphetamines combined. Because prescription drugs are legal and prescribed by a doctor, many people do not think of them as harmful. However, people can become addicted to certain types of prescription drugs—painkillers, sedatives and tranquilizers, and stimulants. Abuse of prescription drugs can have harmful effects similar to those from abusing other drugs and alcohol. It can dull your senses, your reflexes, and your judgment, and it can make you a threat to both your own safety and that of your co-workers on the job.

Borrowing Someone Else's Medication

What if you need a prescription—for instance, you've got an injury that's slowing you down at work and you need some pain pills—but you don't have health insurance and don't think you can afford to see a doctor to get a prescription? The temptation is to find a willing co-worker who's taking some medication and borrow a pill from that person every now and then. You should not do this, because it is against the law to transfer prescription medications. It is also potentially dangerous to take them while not under a doctor's supervision.

If you are taking prescription drugs, keep the following things in mind:

- **Take prescription drugs only as directed.** Your doctor and pharmacist will give you information about the drug and how and when it should be used. They will also tell you about side effects and what not to take or do while taking the drug. Before you get a prescription, make sure the doctor who gives it to you knows that you work in construction.
- **Understand the side effects.** Some drugs can make you drowsy or less able to concentrate. You must tell your supervisor if you are taking a prescription drug that could affect your motor or mental skills. You must not drive or operate power tools or heavy equipment when taking certain types of prescription drugs. Your doctor will be able to tell you which drugs you should tell your supervisor you are taking.
- **Do not extend or share your prescription.** When your prescription period is up, you must return to your doctor for an examination to get more medication if you need it. Do not lie to your doctor to get more medication; if the symptoms have stopped, quit taking the medication. Do not talk friends into getting your prescriptions filled for you. Never share your prescription medication with anyone else.
- **Know when to ask for help.** If you find that you cannot get through the day without a prescription drug, see your doctor immediately. People can become addicted to prescription drugs, especially painkillers, sometimes without realizing what is happening. Your doctor can help you reduce your dependence on the drug safely.

The Warning Signs of Substance Abuse

- Often arrives late to work
- Often leaves work early
- Takes days off for unexplained reasons
- Sometimes disappears from the jobsite during the day for prolonged periods
- Suffers frequent colds, headaches, or other ailments
- Often disappears from the jobsite for short periods
- Does not show up for work at all
- Seems disconnected from what's going on
- Loses interest in grooming or starts showing indifference to personal hygiene
- Loses a lot of weight suddenly
(or in the case of steroids, gains a lot of muscle all of a sudden)
- Acts moody or paranoid, or otherwise unpredictably
- Reacts oddly or violently, particularly to common work situations
- Borrows money frequently
- Slurs speech, walks unsteadily, or has bloodshot eyes
- Seems unusually tired or unusually hyper
- Has serious financial or family problems

Effect on Job Performance

- Misses deadlines often
- Makes more mistakes than usual
- Does poorer quality work than usual
- Is not as productive as usual
- Leaves co-workers to pick up slack
- Lies to cover up absences and mistakes
- Doesn't pay attention or can't concentrate
- Works erratically
- Works more slowly (or much more quickly) than usual
- Often involved in accidents both on and off the job
- Often cited for safety violations at work
- Sustains a series of minor injuries
- Injures co-workers
- Shows anger or hostility toward co-workers and supervisors
- Has escalating problems with co-workers and supervisors
- Picks fights and has arguments at work

Do you have a substance abuse problem?

If you have been reading this module and think you have, or could be developing, a substance abuse problem—get help. For one thing, you will lose your job if you do not (or you will not have any success in finding one). If you are caught using drugs or alcohol on the job but you can prove you are in a substance abuse program, you may be less likely to be fired on the spot.

To get help, contact any of the organizations listed in *Appendix A*. At least one of these groups should have an office in your city or town or in a nearby city. Local offices for many of these organizations are listed in your telephone book or online. In addition, a hospital or clinic in your town may offer programs that can help you.

Read your employee handbook. It probably has a section on employee substance abuse, and information on company assistance for employees who admit to a substance abuse problem before being caught. Your company will be a lot more understanding if you admit the problem before it negatively affects your job performance, or before the problem makes you a safety risk. Don't allow a substance-abuse issue to escalate until it becomes a serious work-related issue; at that point, your company will probably show you little or no sympathy.

Summary

If a worker drinks or takes drugs on the job, or if a worker has a problem with drugs or alcohol, that person is endangering the safety of everyone on the jobsite. Because construction work is so demanding and potentially dangerous, and because workers need to be aware and alert at all times, many companies have zero-tolerance policies on the use of drugs and alcohol on the job, and many have a zero-tolerance policy against their employees using illegal drugs at all. Substance abuse—not only of illegal drugs but also of alcohol and prescription medications—can wreck lives as well as careers, and can lead to long-term health problems, and even death. If you think a co-worker has a substance abuse problem or is using drugs or alcohol on the job, you need to report it to your supervisor. Therefore, you should know the warning signs of substance abuse. If you believe you have a substance abuse problem, get help immediately.