

Seven Ways to Get Along in an Open Office

In an office where there are few walls--and even fewer secrets--good intentions aren't good enough.

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ONE QUESTION SURVEY

What type of tightrope walk does your home/work balance most closely resemble? (Choose one)

- One with a safety net
- One with no safety net
- One I do while juggling 3 balls
- One I do while juggling 3 balls, 4 fire batons, 5 machetes and a bowling ball
- I'm no fool: I leave the tightrope walking up to my partner.

Here's my vote

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Show me the way

When design writer Ralph Caplan and Herman Miller architecture and design manager Judith Ramquist started dating in the mid 70s, they faced a few obstacles: they lived 900 miles apart, they both had teenagers, and they both worked in Action Office cubicles. In short, they didn't have the privacy at home or at work for phone conversations in which they could exchange terms of endearment.

So they started doing something they called "talking AO" (for "Action Office"). "We surrounded whatever it was we wanted to say with general things," says Caplan, who is now married to Ramquist. "We never set up dates. We set up meetings. If we were planning a trip together, I'd say, 'Is that going to leave time for printing and binding?' And that meant, 'Are we leaving enough time to drive to Kalamazoo?' I talk to people all day long about printing and binding, so talking about that wouldn't catch my co-workers' attention."

In developing their own language, Caplan and Ramquist found a way of nurturing a budding romance without distracting their co-workers. It was a civilized and courteous approach.

Anyone who sits in a cubicle--and roughly 40 million of us do--knows that being polite in an open office is not easy. In the three decades that cubicles have been around, few universal rules for behavior in the open office have evolved. As a result, we improvise. Daily we make decisions about eating at our desks, playing music, interrupting a co-worker, using a speakerphone, and picking up a newspaper (or a memo or a file) from an office mate's desk. We do our best to be productive and expressive without interfering with our co-workers, who are productive and expressive in other ways.

It is inevitable that your co-workers will annoy you and that

you will annoy them. As one open-office worker says, "If you're looking for perfect, this isn't it." And while you may not all love each other, it is possible to get along. Here are seven approaches to try, along with a few caveats. (For specific tips, try our [Can't-We-All-Just-Get-Along Open-Office Survival Kit](#).)

Apply the Golden Rule

It's pretty obvious, but "doing unto others as you would have them do unto you" is one way to go, especially if your co-workers are a lot like you. The problem is that it doesn't allow for diversity, says Cecil Williams, a former corporate psychologist at Herman Miller and now a principal at DCW Consultants, a human services consulting firm. "The assumption behind the Golden Rule is filled with error," he says. "I don't want to have others do unto me as they would have me do unto them because what I value and what others value might be two completely different things."

In an office without walls, treating others in the way you like to be treated can actually exacerbate the situation. How different people view interruptions is a good example. Extroverts get stimulated by people dropping by and they see those interruptions as part of their work. Introverts, on the other hand, value being able to focus on their work. When their concentration is broken, they see it as an interruption to their real work rather than seeing it as a different kind of work.

Watch for--and respect--cues

Another approach is to use and look for cues. Dirty looks can be an effective cue. If you're whistling a happy tune and a co-worker shoots one of those looks your way, you can be pretty sure she wants you to cut it out. Body language, however, is more difficult to interpret correctly. Someone who crosses and folds her arms close to her body might be saying "Leave me alone." Then again, she might be cold.

Physical obstacles are another kind of cue. Some office workers use screens to block the entrance to their office and hope that people get the message. But that's the problem, says Williams: People don't get the message because they don't want to get the message. "People will just move the screens and say, 'Excuse me.' Most cues don't work because they all depend on the willingness of people to acknowledge and accept the cues."

Twenty years ago, employees at Hallmark tied ribbons at the entrances of their cubicles--green for when they were available and red for when they weren't--but that didn't work, either. Williams recalls that there was a tendency to put up a red ribbon and leave it there indefinitely. "That was like saying, 'You should never come into my space and if I want to talk I'll come to you,'" he says.

Create guidelines before the move

In an ideal world, team members would have a meeting in which they can talk about anticipated issues *before* they move into an open space, says Williams. "The whole purpose is to get people to talk about what is annoying to them and to

come up with ways to avoid those annoyances. Establish some general rules of play, write them down, and post them. You're still going to have situations where you'll need to have a one-on-one conversation with someone, but you'll have something formal to point to and say, "We agreed to this."

When Andersen Worldwide SC in Chicago moved 1,100 people (30% of whom had been in enclosed offices) into new, open plan offices in November of 1996, they did just that. "We anticipated that we were going to need 'good neighbor policies' because so many people had been in enclosed offices," says Bethany Davis, who was the liaison between the project user group (which was composed of representatives from all the groups moving into the new building) and the implementation team.

A project user group brainstorming session resulted in a long list of items, "some of them nit-picky," says Davis, such as whether or not people could have WAV files on their computers. Her team then "took the list up a level because we didn't want to be prescriptive", ending up with the following 10 over-arching philosophies. Each department could then determine the specifics.

Andersen Worldwide SC's Etiquette Guidelines for Common Areas

- Be accessible to co-workers and clients
- Use speaker phones only in enclosed spaces.
- Keep work spaces tidy.
- Share neighborhood spaces.
- Use main corridors. Don't cut through neighborhoods.
- Remember that your conversation may be disruptive to others.
- Share the responsibility of a productive environment.
- Be courteous in the use of shared spaces.
- Cancel room reservations.
- Greet guests as they enter the space.

In addition, hot food is not allowed in the work areas.

The premise of the guidelines is "be a good neighbor," says Davis. "Some people thought it was silly to post standard rules of etiquette that they already knew. But the point is to give them support--something that everyone agreed on--if they do have to confront someone about an issue."

Andersen Worldwide's hard work before the move paid off. How closely the guidelines are followed varies from group to group, but for the most part the guidelines are doing their job, Davis happily reports. People are getting along.

Create guidelines after the move

Millions of us, however, don't have the luxury of talking the issues over before the move, since we are already in open offices. It's not an ideal situation like the one Andersen Worldwide had, but it's not too late to come up with guidelines.

The major disadvantage of having the conversation after the fact is that it's no longer theory. "At that point, you know who

sits next to you and that person will take anything you say personally, whereas if you talk before the move, all the issues are more abstract," says Williams. Furthermore, once you are in the new space, it's difficult to separate your personal experience with the space (feeling that you don't have enough storage, for example, or that there isn't enough natural light), from true interpersonal issues. The former colors the latter.

Be direct (but only when you have to be)

If your group is not the kind to get together and come up with some guidelines, you might have to use the one-to-one, direct approach. Many people find it difficult to confront one of their team mates, in part because they are afraid they'll be labeled as intolerant or they'll be seen as having weak interpersonal skills. For that reason, you must decide if the issue is important enough to you to take a stand on, regardless of the consequences. People are also afraid that if they say, "I can't concentrate when you play loud acid rock," the person will respond "Too bad. The music is important to *my* concentration."

You can minimize the chances of that happening by using the old standby, "I" statements. If you say to the person, "Your music is driving me nuts," that's putting the blame on them. If you say, "I'm having a terrible time concentrating," then you're not criticizing the other person. In addition, Williams says, be as factual and specific as possible and offer alternatives. "Say, 'I'm working on a project that's due by noon and I really need to be able to concentrate. Would you mind turning off your radio until then?' It's important to suggest solutions so the person doesn't get the idea that you're dumping the problem on him and expecting him to take care of it."

Find another space

If nothing you've read so far will work in your situation, it's time to move on--not to another job, necessarily, but to another space. Take a project to the cafeteria or a conference room and spread out. You might still have noise, but it might be a type of noise that's easier to block out than the noise that's irritating you back at your cubicle. Work from home, if possible. Or swap cubicles with someone on your team. There's usually at least a partial solution if you look hard enough and want it bad enough.

Ride it out

Finally, you can hang on until things change, as they are bound to. Perhaps you'll learn to turn all noise into white noise; it is possible to censor not only what you say but also what you choose to listen to, and that's a valuable skill in an open office. Or perhaps a solution that's acceptable to everyone will emerge. "In my group, we are very comfortable with telling someone who has stopped by, 'Can I get back to you in a few minutes?'" says Davis. "And after a while you get to know whether your co-workers are concentrating or just doing process work and can be interrupted."

In an open office, even well-meaning people are going to bump into each other sometimes. So pay less attention to

what irritates you about your office mates. Pay more attention to the things you do that might be irritating to others. Give them the benefit of the doubt. If things get really bad, eat garlic. Lots of it.

The "Can't-We-All-Just-Get Along?" Open-Office Survival Kit

The irony of the open office is that it does its job too well --it facilitates communication to such a great extent that those chance meetings and overheard conversations can drive us to distraction. How you handle certain situations will depend on whether your group is friendly and relaxed or reserved and rigid. In general, however, good neighbors use the following techniques:

- If you can see someone working several workstations away, but aren't sure whether or not she's available, call her on the phone. If her phone is forwarded, she's probably trying to concentrate.
- When tempted to join an informal meeting, ask yourself these questions: Is this any of my business? Can I make a meaningful contribution? Would I interrupt this meeting if it were happening in an enclosed office with the door open?
- When you see something you'd like to look at or use on a co-worker's desk, ask yourself, "Would I borrow this without permission if my co-worker had an enclosed office?" The answer is also dependent on whether or not you have a friendly relationship with the person. If the answer is yes to both questions, remember to return what you borrow.
- Don't cut through offices. Use the corridor or established aisles.
- If someone has been standing in your office talking to you for more than a few minutes, suggest moving to a meeting room or the cafeteria.
- Don't use anything that might be disruptive (e.g., a speaker phone or radio) without asking others whether it will bother them. In buildings that are so open that sound travels between departments, this may mean asking people outside of your department as well as those you sit next to.
- Remember that others can hear your phone conversations. Be considerate and keep your voice down.
- Don't call out to co-workers who are several workstations away. Instead, walk to the person's office if you want to speak to him.
- A simple way of fostering cooperation is to get to know those around you. "If I understand what you do and who you are, I am much more willing to try to accommodate you than if you are simply a faceless body on the other side of a panel who is bent on interfering with my privacy," says Williams.

CHRISTINE MacLEAN works in an open office in complete and utter harmony with her co-workers, all of whom are unfailingly polite and considerate. She had absolutely no hidden agenda in writing about this particular topic.

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