

Dealing With Difficult People: 10 Tips To Stay In Control

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We all encounter difficult people in the workplace. We may be that way ourselves from time to time.

How effective you are at dealing with difficult people has a direct impact on how successful you become and can affect your job advancement, your relationships, your overall confidence and even your health. This article defines 10 actions that you can employ to stay in control. By demonstrating self-control, you are better prepared for dealing with almost any situation and any individual. Stuff's going to happen but you don't have to accept being the victim. You have choices.

Definition

We often use the term "difficult person," but I will define it for our purposes here. By difficult, I mean a person who routinely exhibits one or more of the following behaviors:

- Hard to work with or manage
- Doesn't play by conventional social or organizational rules
- Is a disruptive or disturbing element to others.

By difficult, I don't necessarily mean someone who disagrees with you. Disagreement is often healthy and even good for business. It can serve as a check-and-balance to help ensure that the best ideas and decisions are considered; it stretches the players to

perform at their best. It's not always important that we agree. It is, however, important that we can work reasonably well together despite our different points of view.

10 Tips

Let's now examine the 10 tips—or actions—that you can employ to help you stay in control when dealing with difficult people.

1. Take Time to Pause

When a difficult situation presents itself, pause and count to that proverbial 10. You are at a crossroads. What you say and how you say it could make matters worse or improve the situation. Now is the time to think before you act; to collect your thoughts and corral in your emotions. If communicating verbally, this means pausing for a moment or taking an extended break. If using email, sleep on it before replying, or obtain a second opinion before sending the email. While pausing, look at the big picture. Search for what's best for the business or the relationship. Focus on a good outcome and what that might be.

2. Examine Your Behavior

Whenever you encounter a difficult person, first examine your own behavior to determine if you are part of or the entire problem. Ask yourself, "Where's your responsibility in all this?" You may not be able to alter the behavior of others but you can change yourself if that's what is needed.

3. Put Yourself in Their Shoes

When you are dealing with a difficult person, it can be immensely helpful to look at the situation from their perspective. For example: What are they going through? What is their objective? How are they feeling about the situation? What is the hardship they are facing? Your point of view will likely be affected by better understanding their point of view. How would you react if you were in their shoes? Be as understanding as possible of their frustrations or point of view. Doing so may also help to win them over—they may even come around to seeing you as an ally. Demonstrating empathy is a trait commonly found in the best performers.

4. Be Willing to Listen

When you listen and the other person knows you are listening, walls start coming down. It prepares you both for coming together for the best solution. They begin to feel that you care about them. Use body language as you are listening such as tilting your head, relaxing your body and frequently looking into their eyes. Be empathetic and display compassion, if relevant. An objective for listening is to learn what they are going after. For example, they may be looking to save face, or they may be seeking power, respect, attention, approval or some other form of recognition. It may be helpful at some point to ask them what they are feeling right now. Avoid making decisions or judgments before you have a chance to hear their side.

5. Be Candid About the Issue

Be straight with others. Constructively confront them with the problem you perceive and what you need from them. Site specific examples and avoid any vagueness. Initiate this conversation in private. As soon as possible, set the expectations. Tell them what you can do and what you cannot do. Follow up on the discussion to ensure expectations are clear and things are proceeding satisfactorily.

6. Project Calm

Your behavior will have a pronounced effect on the situation so you want to learn to manage your emotions. Lead from a position of strength. Don't become defensive, angry or desperate; doing so will undermine achieving a satisfactory outcome for both you and the other person. Maintain your cool. Relax your body language. Slow down the cadence of the conversation. Be thoughtful with the words you choose. Keep your voice low. Although the stakes may be high for you and the other person, promote casual conversation so that emotion can be displaced with listening and thinking rationally.

7. Choose Your Battles

When you are dealing with a difficult person, you typically have more than one option. Make sure that the option you choose is in both your best interest and the business' best interest. Sometimes give-and-take is not possible with a particular person—there is no chance of compromise. Ask yourself if this situation is worth the time, energy and overall stress that it will cause. If it's not then let it go. Stop talking about it or giving it any more energy.

8. Don't Let Others Control You

When you go to work each day, I suggest you *not* show up with the primary objective of being liked. If you do, you will likely have a disappointing career. No matter how you behave and treat others, there will be many days when someone will not like your behavior or even you. It's not about being liked. It's about integrity and doing the right thing. If you make being liked—getting the approval of others—a primary objective, then you are setting yourself up to be controlled by others. This could cause you to do nearly anything just to get their approval, including rolling over on important issues.

9. Deal with Aggression Firmly

Whether the aggression is delivered verbally or is approaching physical, shut down the interaction and be willing to continue when they have calmed down. Don't tolerate verbal abuse or someone threatening your personal safety through physical or psychological fear. Be assertive in insisting that the difficult person does not continue with the abusive behavior. Once you have shown your willingness to tolerate abusive behavior, that behavior will not only continue but will likely escalate. Set boundaries. Let the person know you will respect him or her, but expect to be treated with respect in return.

10. Take the High Road

When dealing with a difficult person, the likelihood is high that they are *not* taking the high road. Just the opposite; their heels are dug in. Someone's going to have to budge

and reach out. As hard as it may be, make that someone you. Doing so demonstrates professional maturity and is a major step in finding a successful path in dealing with the difficult person. This can help diffuse the situation. A great bonus in taking the high road is that you will earn respect and your stock value will increase.

In Closing...

Dealing with difficult people can be so common at work and in life that you want to continue to develop the skills that help you maintain your self-control when you encounter a difficult person. If you continue to fine-tune your behavior, you will find a reduction in the number of difficult people you encounter. Why? Because we often contribute to the problem or are the problem.

Now, go become your imagined self!

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