

A Few Simple Rules for Dealing with Difficult People At Work

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So you want to know how to deal with difficult people. Well, the obvious answer is to stay as far away from them as you can. There you have it. Case closed – end of article.

I'm sorry, what did you say? You don't work in a cave. I see. You must be one of those success-bound people who can't seem to avoid interactions with others. You occasionally must deal with the inconsiderate, incorrigible, or even the downright mean. In fact, sometimes your success even depends on your ability to work together with "those" people.

Well, why didn't you just say that in the first place?

So what should you do? Should you ignore the person, or should you confront? Unfortunately, while you may want to avoid dealing with a touchy interpersonal problem, it is probably not going to go away. And it may likely just make things worse.

A supervisor or manager who avoids conflict sets their team on a dangerous course. Let's say, for example, that you hesitate to confront a team member who always returns late from lunch. Not only are you reinforcing this person's work habit, you will also begin to lose the respect of everyone else who works for you. Eventually, if or when your boss notices the problem, it is a safe bet that she or he won't avoid confronting you.

On the other hand, you just can't go around confronting everyone and everything. It will wear you out. Scolding an employee who made a mistake after trying his or best will only earn you a reputation of being a bad manager.

Fortunately, there are a few simple rules to help you decide when – or if to confront someone.

1. When an employee's performance impedes your organization's goals. If a person's behavior is affecting the group's work, it is time to talk to the person. If a team member's lack of preparation for a staff meeting delays completion of a group project, it is your job to discuss it with him or her.

2. When you determine that someone's actions will impede your own success. If, for instance, another supervisor or manager is bullying you, it may have no impact on the rest of the organization. However, the actions of this person may serve to harm your own career advancement. The bottom line is, when someone is doing something that could cause you professional harm, you need to ask yourself, "Can I afford to ignore this?"

3. When a problem causes you anxiety every time you see it. Maybe one of your team members is overly critical of another team member's work contributions on a regular basis. You feel as though you need to sit down with this

person to discuss it, but the prospect of having the discussion makes you nervous. You worry that it could bring up other problems, or that the employee will become angry with you, complaining about you to other staff members. Maybe you are worried that the person may even quit with no chance of being able to replace him or her due to budget constraints. Again, however, by doing nothing, you will probably only make things worse.

Before confronting your "problem person," consider that you may be contributing to the problem too – at least to some degree. If something someone says or does bothers you, he or she may be doing something inappropriate. At the same time, you also need to ask yourself why you're having a hard time coping with that person's behavior. What part of the problem do you own?

Learning what to say and how to say it

Whether it's the abusive manager who chews you out in front of others, or the misguided employee whose lack of follow through jeopardizes the success of the entire team, the secret to motivating someone to change his or her behavior is knowing what to say and how to say it. Here are some points to consider.

Remember that the other person can't read your mind. It's important that you state very clearly how you see the situation.

And yes – you may need to say this more than once. Don't assume anything when it comes to what you think the other person should already know.

Don't belittle the person. Your tone should be firm and direct – but never talk down to the other person. People will listen better if they don't feel as though you think they are beneath you – in intelligence or position. Instead, concentrate on stating the effects that the person's behavior has on you or the team. If, for example, someone is always making excuses, try saying, "What happens to me when you come in and make excuses all the time is that I stop listening."

State the facts clearly and in as few words as possible. Once you have stated the facts, don't dwell on them. There is no point in dragging this part out. Simply state the facts of the situation and quickly move on to the effects of the person's behavior. If you don't, the person is likely to start tuning you out.

Frame your concerns in a positive way. Don't dwell on the difficult person's behavior. Instead, focus on how he or she can improve. Don't say, "You're always alienating your team." Say, "You need to be more helpful." Instead of "You never get back from lunch on time," try, "I know you can get better at getting back from lunch on time."

Consider the other person's self-esteem. Choose your words carefully. Most psychology experts believe that the single most important motivating factor for anyone is their self-esteem. Whenever you confront a difficult person, ask yourself how the words you are going to use in your discussion have the potential to either help or harm this person's self-esteem.

Have a clear game plan in mind. After you have explained the problem to the person and told him or her exactly what you want, include how you are prepared to help – and spell out a time frame in which change has to occur.

What to avoid when confronting a difficult person

1. Overreacting. Let's not even talk about the physical consequences of lashing out at someone. You know, things like stress, ulcers, high blood pressure and the like. Instead, let's concentrate on the organizational problems that may likely occur.

It may seem like a great release of anger and frustration to get loud with one of your employees, or even one of your peers. However, when the yell fest is all over, any positive on-the-job results are likely to be very short-term. Someone may do what you want because he or she is scared of you, but you can be sure it won't last long. Eventually, this person will find a way to get back at you – whether by sabotaging his or her work, damaging your own work, or any number of other ways.

Additionally, staff who are afraid of you may wind up doing only what you say – and no more. You could easily create a creativity-stifled team of "yes people." So, for the sake of your own credibility and respect, you can't afford the mistake of overreacting.

2. Complaining. First, let's draw a distinction between complaining and venting. It is fine to vent your frustrations as long as you follow-up by doing something about it. However, complaining with no intention of doing anything to fix the problem accomplishes nothing. And, if you are continually complaining to everyone except the person you have a problem

with, you're obviously speaking to the wrong people. You won't begin to solve anything until you speak to the person you have a problem with.

And remember this: One of the quickest ways for a supervisor to gain the mistrust of other team members is to complain to one of them about one of their peers.

3. Lecturing. By the time most people start their professional lives, they have endured countless hours on the wrong end of lectures from parents, teachers, and others who claim to know what's best. As a result, somewhere along the way, any message you chose to convey through this same medium may likely get tuned out. So just remember that nothing will turn off a person quicker than being talked down to, lecture-style.

Ultimately, you must decide for yourself how you can best deal with a difficult person at work. Just remember that as a supervisor or manager, your life is a stage – and that your employees are always waiting and watching to see just how well you act the part.

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Sources:

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