

# Dealing With Difficult People

Most of us have to deal with difficult people from time to time. Difficult people not only create conflict, they may sabotage conflict resolution plans as well. Here are some quick tips on how to deal with some common difficult personality types.

## Difficult Personality Types

**Aggressive types** want to force their view-point on you. They like to blow off steam. They may attack verbally. When dealing with aggressive behavior:

- Don't attack back.
- Do ask them firmly to calm down and speak their mind.
- Remain calm. Listen without interruption and when they are through, paraphrase the points made to show you heard and understood them. A calm response and the sense that they have been heard will often soothe an aggressive type.

**Know-it-alls** are "experts" who have no patience for other people's input.

- Don't be intimidated, or let them take over a meeting.
- Try to keep them focused. These people often like to hear themselves speak and will go off on tangents
- Do listen to them and try to benefit from their knowledge.

**Victims** often complain and feel they are being treated unfairly.

- Don't try to become their protector.
- Do ask them to provide positive ideas and solutions on how to improve the situation.

**Sarcastic types** use words as weapons, often destroying harmony in a group and causing resentment. They can be poor team players.

- Don't let them get away with this behavior. Let them know that sarcasm is unacceptable.
- Do compliment them when they say something positive or show team spirit.

**Nay-sayers** have nothing good to say about others' ideas.

- Don't try to reform them.
- Do invite them to suggest alternatives. Many times they will back off if asked to say something constructive

**Yay-sayers** will go along with anything just to gain approval.

- Discourage them from making more commitments than they can handle.
- Do make sure they follow through on what they agree to do.

**Withdrawn types** seem to have nothing to contribute and are difficult to draw out.

- Don't nag them to open up.
- Do ask open-ended questions that require them to produce more than a yes or no answer.
- Be patient about waiting for their answer.



## **Types of Difficult Behavior/People (Continued)**

Don't assume that difficult people understand that their behavior is disruptive or problematic.

**Most people don't recognize the impact they are having on others. Do you?**

In any environment, everyone must find a way to work together effectively and cooperatively. Therefore, understanding what motivates difficult people will help you identify the best strategies to handle difficult people and behaviors.

**The following are additional various types of difficult people you might encounter:**

- Chatterbox
- Gossip
- Back-stabber
- Complainer
- Negativist
- Bullies
- (Over) Delegator
- Credit Grabber
- Kiss-Up
- Single-Minded
- Loud One
- The Know It All
- Intentionally Disruptive
- I'm Sinking and I'm Taking You With Me

## **Levels of Difficult Behavior**

### **□ Difficult**

- An otherwise friendly person who's behavior can be disruptive to your work or the environment
- Chatterbox, Over Delegators, Loud Ones

### **□ Challenging**

- Chronic behavior that becomes annoying, distracting, and difficult to ignore
- Know-it-alls, Complainers, Negativists, Kiss-Ups, Single-Mindeds

### **□ Toxic**

- Potential underlying personality issues
- Can be exploitative and threatening
- Bullies, Gossipers, Credit Grabbers, Intentionally Disruptives, I'm Sinking-ers, Back-Stabbers

# Winning Over Difficult People

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- **Be calm.** Becoming angry or overly excited in response isn't constructive and will only escalate the situation.
- **Give them your undivided attention.** Let them say what's on their mind without interruption.
- **Express empathy** and, if appropriate, say you are sorry.
- **Speak and listen non-defensively.** Don't take it personally. Remember, these people are usually mad at the situation not at you.
- **Paraphrase** what they have said to make sure that you have accurately captured the content and the feelings.
- **Begin active problem solving.** Offer suggestions for solving the problem. If you don't have an immediate solution, explain that you will explore options and get back to them later.
- **Mutually agree on the solution.** Find solutions that are acceptable to everyone and execute them.
- **Follow up.** This is crucial. Just because anger is diffused or an issue is temporarily resolved, do not drop it. Follow through to make sure that action steps are working and to ensure that goals are being met.

Look Deeper. People don't usually wish to be difficult for the sake of being difficult. Look below the surface at what drives/motivates that person. What needs might their behavior(s) be satisfying or fulfilling?

Examine Yourself. People tend to assume that other people, not themselves, are difficult. Are you sure? Could you be overreacting? Has this person pushed one of your "hot buttons"? Have you contributed to making the situation difficult? Why do you feel that you behave the way that you do? Be open to making changes in your own behaviors.

Approach the Person in Private. Don't let a situation fester. Ask the the difficult person for a one-on-one conversation. Use a soft entry. Talk about what you are experiencing by using "I" statements. Share how the situation/person is impacting you. Be respectful. The person may not even realize how they have behaved. If they are aware, but don't care, continue the conversation as positively as you can to reach the best outcome possible. Find a way to make it in their best interest to be cooperative. Tell the person the impact that changing their behavior will have from a positive perspective (for both parties).

### **Be Open, Clear and Consistent**

Encourage open and honest communication. Be clear and consistent. Don't be defensive. When asking questions or seeking clarification, use **open-ended questions (see next page for examples)**.

### **Change Your Approach**

You can't make someone change. However, you can change your actions in ways that may promote positive change in other's behavior.

If one approach to communicating and interacting with the other person doesn't work, try a new way. Don't get stuck in the "get a bigger hammer" syndrome.

### **Don't Reward Bad Behavior**

Don't let other people's behavior draw you into behaving badly. An eye for an eye will make you both blind.

Don't frequently cover up for others or routinely fix their problems. Give them the opportunity to grow and develop.

### **Focus on the Goal of the Conversation**

Keep your eyes on the prize. Remember what you want to achieve, what you want changed. Focus on achieving your interests, not winning your positions.

### **Follow Up After the Initial Discussion**

Check in with the other about how things are going. Has the situation improved? Has the behavior changed for the better? Or worse? Determine whether a follow-up conversation is needed or would make a positive impact.

### **Recognize Some Things Can't Be Fixed**

Some people have issues that need to be dealt with that go beyond effective communication and conflict management skills. If you find yourself in this situation, identify ways to mitigate the situation and improve the situation, even if it isn't resolved. Get help if needed. At the same time, don't be too quick to judge a person as beyond "repair."

## **COMMUNICATION: Examples of Open-Ended Questions**

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- What would you like to discuss?
- What is your most pressing issue?
- How would you describe the issue?
- Who else may be affected?
  
- Who else may need to be involved in this discussion?
- What is it that is most important to you about this issue?
- What about this issue seems to concern/bother you the most?
- What do you need from me to better understand my concerns?
- What possible options are there here?
  
- What are the pros and cons for each option?
- What will work from these options for you?
- What do we need to do to put closure on this issue?
- What else?

### **And then there are phrases like...**

“tell me more...,” “please go on...,” “tell me about..,” “explain...,” “describe..,” “help me to understand...,” that work like open ended questions to encourage dialogue

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**CAUTION** Asking “Why?” often puts people on the defensive... use it with **caution**

## How good a listener are you?

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	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely
1. I allow the speaker to express his or her complete thought without interrupting.				
2. When someone is speaking to me, I eliminate distractions by turning off the radio or television, putting aside other work or other things that might interfere.				
3. I lean forward and make eye contact with the speaker.				
4. I listen for the feeling behind the speaker's message.				
5. I paraphrase the speaker's message to ensure I understand what they are saying.				
6. I don't "turn off" the speaker because I don't personally know or like the person speaking.				
7. I express genuine interest in the other individual's conversation with verbal and non-verbal cues.				
8. I ask questions to clarify the speaker's message.				
9. I avoid rehearsing what I want to say while others are talking.				
10. I pay attention to the speaker's energy level, posture, gestures, facial expression, tone and pace of speech as well as their words.				

## Practice Exercises for Reframing

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Below are statements that reflect what you might be thinking and would like to say. However, you know that it would be better to reframe your thoughts and feelings to say something more constructive. How would you reframe these statements? What could you say instead that still conveys your thoughts, feelings and underlying interests?

1. You're nothing but a back-stabber. You better stop talking about me. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. You're always focused on what we can't do. You're the most negative person I've ever worked with. You're dragging us all down. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. If you weren't so disorganized, our team would have gotten our work done on time.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. I'm trying to do my best! But how can I get all this work done when three different people are telling me what to do! \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. I hate this kind of bickering. If you'd just act reasonably we could solve this mess. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. Just because I'm new doesn't mean I don't know anything! \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. Can we just focus on the task? I don't have time for all this chit-chat. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. Look, I've told you before, you can't wait until the last minute to ask me to do something and expect me to drop everything else and get it done on time for you. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. Hey, I came up with that idea in our last meeting. No one ever listens to me! \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

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