

Dealing with Difficult People

When confronted with the behavior of difficult people, it might be helpful (although difficult!) to follow these steps:

1. **Actively listen to the difficult person.** Try to be non-judgmental and recognize that what they are saying or doing makes sense to them.

2. **State your observation;** react using an “I” statement.

I feel/am _____ when you _____ because _____
_____.

3. **Indicate your request.**

My request is that you _____.

Or

What I want is _____.

Or

I would prefer that you _____.

4. **Be silent, maintain eye contact, appear neutral.**

5. **Repeat the steps,** if necessary.

Planning

When confronting an employee about his/her difficult behavior, it is important to plan for that meeting:

1. Describe the behavior. What is its impact on you? Your work performance?
2. What are your reactions to the behavior?
3. Be intervening, what do you hope to accomplish? Is that realistic?
4. If you do intervene, what reactions might you expect? How will you handle them?
5. What personal pitfalls will you need to overcome? How?

The following are a few of the common types of difficult behavior by co-workers with tips on how to deal with them:

- Praise/Put Down Specialists: *“That presentation was good. You must have put some effort into it.”*

Try to maintain your cool and get control of the conversation by questioning the offender about his/her inappropriate remarks. Usually, the person will respond by saying you misunderstood them, but they will sense that you aren't vulnerable to those remarks and avoid them.

- Strongly opinionated colleagues: *“The best way to do this is ...”*

Try to stay professional, rather than emotional. Determine whether the speaker has a valid point and consider how they will be affected by the action. Be convincing in expressing your viewpoint, but open to other viewpoints as well. “I appreciate your enthusiasm on this program, however these records suggest that we should ...”

- The Intimidator: Intimidators don't threaten directly, but imply that they can hurt or embarrass you.

Present a poised and calm front—prepare responses that will get your point across without directly forcing the issue. *“I’m not totally comfortable with that plan.” “I’m thinking about what you said.”*

- The Backstabber:

Confront the person you think has talked about you behind your back. Report what you heard, but don’t be argumentative. *“I’d appreciate your clearing up some confusion. I’ve been told that you said I did ... Did you really say that? If so, I’d like you to explain it to me ...”* Don’t blame or point fingers, but be firm.

- Competitors:

Be professional and gracious. Give these employees the respect they are seeking. Make them feel important so they don’t have to run you down to life themselves up. Be honest in taking and giving credit.