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Dealing with difficult people at work

Difficult people do exist at work. They come in every variety and no workplace is without them. **Who** is difficult for you depends on your personality, your experience and your preferences. **How** difficult a person is for you to deal with depends on your self-esteem, your self-confidence and your professional courage.

Dealing with difficult people is easier when the person is just generally obnoxious or when the behaviour affects more than one person. Dealing with difficult people is much tougher when you feel attacked or undermined personally or professionally. It also depends on how comfortable you are with speaking up.

Difficult people come in every conceivable variety. Some talk constantly and never listen. Others must always have the last word. Some colleagues fail to keep commitments. Others criticise anything that they did not create. Some manipulate you so that you end up doing their work. Difficult colleagues may also compete with you for advancement, privilege or the spotlight.

Some people may attempt to undermine you. Leaving you feeling like you need to watch your back. Your boss may play favourites; people form cliques and leave you out. Difficult people and situations exist in every workplace. They all have one thing in common. You must address them. No matter the type of difficult situation in which you find yourself, dealing with difficult people or situations is part of life.

Why You Must Deal With Difficult People

Trust me. **Your situation won't get better; left unaddressed, it usually gets worse.** Unaddressed, conflict simmers just below the surface. If you don't address it, it can erupt counterproductively at work.

Initially, when you encounter a difficult person or situation, take some time to understand exactly what is happening to you. Know that you are not alone. Once you are fully aware of what is happening, deciding to live with the situation

long term is not an option. You may become so angry and feel so much pain that your efforts to address the situation become irrational. **It's far better to address the difficult person while you can maintain some objectivity and emotional control.**

Constant complaining about the colleague or situation can quickly earn you the title of whiner or complainer. Managers wonder why you are unable to solve your own problems – even if the manager's tolerance or encouragement of the situation is part of the problem.

Worse Case Scenario If You Fail to Deal With Difficult People

Most importantly, if you are embroiled in a constant conflict at work, you may not only get blamed for being “unable to handle the situation like a mature professional,” you may be labelled as a “difficult” person, too. This label is hard to escape and can have devastating consequences for your career.

Finally, if the situation continues to deteriorate over time, the organisation and your boss may tire of you. The boss may decide you are a “high maintenance” employee, easily replaced with a more professional or cooperative person, and you could lose your job.

Dealing With the Difficult Co-worker

I've witnessed all sorts of dysfunctional approaches to dealing with a difficult colleague. Putting an anonymous note in the person's mailbox is not an option. Placing a can of deodorant on a hygiene-challenged co-worker's desk is not a productive option either. Confronting the bully publicly can often lead to disaster. Putting threatening notes in a desk drawer can leave your boss no option other than to fire you. **So, let's look at more productive ways to address your difficult colleague.**

Are you convinced that in almost all cases you need to productively deal with your difficult co-worker? **Good.** Then, read we will discuss 10 tips to dealing with a difficult person at work.

These are some productive ways to deal with your difficult co-worker.

1: Start out by examining yourself. Are you sure that the other person is really the problem and that you're not overreacting? Have you always experienced difficulty with the same type of person or actions? Does a pattern exist for you in your interaction with colleagues? Do you recognise that you have hot buttons that are easily pushed? (We all do, you know.) Always start with self-examination to determine that the object of your attention really is a difficult person's actions. It is so important here to be really honest with yourself.

2: Explore what you are experiencing with someone you trust. Brainstorm ways to address the situation. When you are the object of an attack, or your boss appears to support the dysfunctional actions of a co-worker, it is often difficult to objectively assess your options. Anger, pain, humiliation, fear and concern about making the situation worse are legitimate emotions.

3: Approach the person with whom you are having the problem for a private discussion. Talk to your colleague about what you are experiencing use “I” messages. (Using “I” messages is a communication approach that focuses on your experience of the situation rather than on attacking or accusing the other person.) You can also explain to your colleague the impact of their actions on you.

4: Be pleasant and agreeable as you talk with the other person. They may not be aware of the impact of their words or actions on you. They may be learning about their impact on you for the first time. Or, they may have to consider and confront a pattern in their own interaction with people. Worst case? They may know their impact on you and deny it or try to explain it away. Unfortunately, some difficult people just don't care. During the discussion, attempt to reach agreement about positive and supportive actions going forward. Take notes to ensure that you are accurate. Agree to review the outcomes. If they do not agree to this inform them politely that you will be reviewing the outcomes.

5: Follow up after the initial discussion. Has the behaviour changed? Gotten better? Or worse? Determine whether a follow-up discussion is needed. Determine whether a follow-up discussion will have any impact. Decide if you want to continue to confront the difficult person by yourself. Become a peacemaker. (Decide how badly you want to make peace with the other person and how much you want your current job. Determine whether you have experienced a pattern of support from your boss.) If you answer, “yes,” to these questions, hold another discussion. If not, escalate and move to the next idea.

Need more tips?

6: If you have done what you can do and employed the points listed above _ with little or no success, **it's time to involve others - your boss or a manager.** This is called **escalation.**

Prepare to talk with your boss. Take notes and address the issues, not as interpersonal problems, but as issues affecting your productivity, the work and your progress on projects. Tell your boss exactly what the difficult person does. Make a plan to address the issues. Perhaps involve your colleague's boss. Recognise that a good boss is likely to bring your difficult colleague and his supervisor into a three or four-way discussion at this point. Expect to participate in follow-up over time.

7: Rally the other employees who might have an issue with the difficult person, too - carefully. Sometimes, a group approach convinces the boss that the impact of the behaviour is wider and deeper than she had originally determined. Be careful with this approach, however. Ensure that you keep it constructive not some type of witch-hunt. Know what works with your boss. You want to solve your problem, not make it look as if you are rabble-rousing and ganging up on another employee.

8: If these approaches fail to work, try to limit the difficult person's access to you. Protect the needs of your business, but avoid working with the person when possible. Don't hurt your own career or your business, but avoidance is an option.

9: Relocate to a new job within your organization. Depending on the size of your company, you may never have to work with this difficult colleague again. Fleeing is definitely an option.

10: If all else fails, you can quit your job. “What, flee, you ask? But, I wasn't the employee with the problem. I was not the difficult co-worker. All I tried to do was my job”.

You're right. But, what price, in terms of your happiness and success, are you willing to pay to stay? People rarely change, what's more they change when they are ready not when you need them too. You need weigh up the good and the bad. If the good wins, stop complaining and get back to work. Back track on these recommended steps and retry some of them when appropriate. If the bad wins, redirect your energy to leaving your current employment. You'll be glad you did.

If you are dealing with a difficult situation at work there is help available. You can contact HR, you may be able to access your employee assistance program. Teamology runs workshops on How to Deal with Difficult People.

How to Book?

Contact Teamology on 1300 707 481, visit our website – www.teamology.com.au and look under courses for workshop details or email us at enquiries@teamology.com.au.