

EIGHT STEPS TO HANDLE DIFFICULT PEOPLE

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If you compiled a list of difficult people, you might include the complainers, know-it-alls, intimidators, gossips, or passive/aggressive people who “yes, but” all the time. Dealing with the public will inevitably lead to some infuriating individuals, some of whom may be customers while others may be associates at work. These “challenges” may require special skills to help you manage the relationship minefield without blowing up in the process. Difficult people can, indeed, be infuriating.

It is worth noting, however, that not everyone is challenged by the same problem. One may have trouble with overbearing men or obstinate adolescents, whereas another may be challenged by passive, super-agreeable yet non-performing individuals. Therefore, it’s important to identify those that are particularly annoying to you. To be forewarned is to be well armed.

In his book, *Coping with Difficult People*, Robert Bramson states that coping doesn’t necessarily imply that you accept another person’s outrageous behavior or, alternately, concentrate on changing his/her personality. It merely asks that you consciously relate to these difficult individuals in a manner that allows both of you to get on with your business especially if it’s in the workplace. The key to dealing with irritating behaviors of others is the realization that you can consciously change your responses and therefore change the interaction.

So, if you ever find yourself facing someone who infuriates you, take the following steps.

1. **UNDERSTAND THE PERSON AND THE PROBLEM.** As you clarify who is doing what, to whom, and why, you may get a better understanding of the underlying needs of the difficult individual. Is the person frustrated by not receiving a service or do they merely want recognition? Aggressive, task-oriented people get stressed out when tasks are not accomplished whereas passive people-pleasers become unnerved with interpersonal conflict. Assertive individuals tend to respect others who act more assertive while serene individuals need a calmer approach.
2. **NEUTRALIZE YOUR IMMEDIATE REACTION.** If you respond to a provocative situation with a temper tantrum, you clearly diminish your ability to manage a difficult person. When you maintain your composure, you can assert yourself and establish proper boundaries. However, it may be necessary to distance yourself emotionally from an intense interaction. Mentally collecting yourself or consciously breathing into your abdomen may provide some breathing room to focus on the problem more clearly.
3. **IDENTIFY YOUR PART IN THE PROBLEM.** Since the way you respond to any given situation either calms or inflames, be aware of your relationship patterns. If you find yourself continually arguing with aggressive individuals, take note, for they may

trigger your internal programming about relating to those personalities. Remember, you become part of the problem if you continue to do more of the same when get the same poor results.

4. **KNOW WHAT YOU WANT.** Clarify your desired outcome. You may want to diffuse the situation, get the individual to cooperate, or just have him or her go away. The intended outcome will provide a target at which to aim your responses. If you are committed to positive results, you are more inclined to achieve them. Sometimes just stating what you want may be sufficient to reduce tension. “I want to resolve this problem. Let’s put our heads together and find a solution.”
5. **BE FLEXIBLE.** As in a game of chess, you must be prepared to move your pieces depending how your opponent replies. An increased awareness of the other person’s needs and your relationship to him or her will provide you with the knowledge to flexibly change what you do in order to achieve your outcome.
6. **INCREASE RAPPORT.** One of the most effective methods when dealing with people is to strengthen rapport. You increase your connection with another when you maintain eye contact, frequently address the individual by his/her name, use “we” words, and match language style, body posture, and tone and tempo of your voice. For example, if you tend to be laid back and people oriented, you may have difficulty dealing with an aggressive, task-oriented individual. However, by adopting an assertive, task-oriented posture, you may increase rapport and have a better chance of achieving your outcome. Those who feel connected in a relationship tend to respond far better to suggestions. Strengthen your rapport and be amazed at the results.
7. **DETACH GRACEFULLY.** If the situation warrants it and you need to distance yourself, detach yourself by creating a boundary, dropping eye contact, altering your body posture, or switching the tone and tempo of your voice. This can be effective even while on the phone. For example, if you want to end your conversation with a compulsive talker, stand up with the phone in hand. Remaining seated may lull you into a comfortable position and merely prolong the endless chatter. Whereas, a standing posture provides a clear message: it’s time to conclude business.
8. **MONITOR FEEDBACK AND ADJUST YOUR STRATEGY.** As you experiment with new approaches, maintain a trial-and-error attitude. You may consider reinforcing positive behaviors or establishing consequences. When you do achieve success, be consistent until you’ve accomplished your goal. Each difficult person will give you an opportunity to expand your repertoire of skills. Over time, you will find yourself managing these challenging individuals with amazing grace.