

10 Tips For Dealing With Difficult Employees

Strategies and tips to help you cope with difficult employees.

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1. Separate, in your mind, the person's professional role from his or her difficult personality. After all, you need this person for to contribute, but you don't have to have to wake up or go to sleep to the obnoxious behavior day after day. Count yourself lucky not to be in a personal relationship with the employee and focus only on the professional contribution you need. Don't engage on an emotional level (e.g., don't get into arguments; don't allow yourself to be goaded or your buttons to be pushed, etc.)
2. Use self-deprecating humor. This is very disarming, particularly to difficult personality types. The ability to laugh at oneself is a key indicator of emotional intelligence, or the ability to connect well with other people. Connecting and listening are the two key skills of good communicators. And being a good communicator is even more critical when you're managing a high-demand employee.
3. Don't take it personally. Recognize that this person is likely having difficulties with similar themes in many other professional and personal relationships. Remember that it's not about you -- it's about this person's prickly personality style; this will help buffer you from becoming emotionally reactive or stressed.
4. When "issues hit the fan," focus on first on listening rather than on arguing. Use comments like, "It sounds like you're very concerned about this aspect of the project." Or "Do you mind filling me in on your thoughts on how we can better deal with this situation?" This lets the difficult, touchy person know you are really paying attention to his or her feelings and expertise. In turn, the employee will finishing venting sooner and then be more open to hearing what you or others have to say.
5. Ask for Clarification. Making sure you've heard the person correctly goes a long way in keeping communication clear. "So, if I've got this right, it sounds like you're saying that we need to take another look at this quarter's marketing communications strategy." Or "Just to be sure we're on the same page, are you saying that you think we need to change course in order for you to meet this deadline?" Using this technique gives the person you are speaking with a chance to confirm that you've heard them correctly, or refine

the message. It will also mollify the employee sooner rather than later, thus giving you a speedier opening to get to your objectives.

6. In a stalemate, rely on the old standby, "We don't have to decide this today." Or, "Let's sleep on it and get back to this later." Or, "Hmm. Let me give that some thought and revisit the issue next week."

7. Say your message in as few words as possible. The less you say, the more likely you are to be heard.

8. Don't repeat yourself. Even if you don't get an acknowledgment from this difficult person that he or she agrees, don't try to "drive your point home" by saying it again a different way (you could say it 50 times and be there all afternoon, but a stubborn person won't necessarily meet you half way.) Say it once and move on.

9. Periodically ask, "Am I making sense?" Asking for feedback as you are speaking lets the touchy employee know you are just as interested that person's reaction and creative input than in being heard or being right.

10. Have an Open Door Policy. When people, and particularly difficult personality types, feel that you are approachable, they are more likely to keep the lines of communication flowing and less likely to let things simmer to crisis / boiling point. Conversely, employers who "table" every request to talk with, "Let's schedule a meeting for this Thursday at 4:00" give the impression that they aren't really interested in staying connected to their employees' concerns, insights and ideas. People shut down communication under rigid guidelines (and are then more likely to act out in a passiveaggressive or hostile way) . On the other hand, when employers are available, people are less likely to take advantage of that policy, particularly if the employer practices good communication skills and skillfully gets the issue out on the table so that both can quickly get back to work (e.g., "Thanks for stopping by to let me know this information. Now, let's get back to it!")

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