

# Dealing with Difficult People

Spouses, children, parents, neighbors, co-workers, customers....the list goes on. The difficult people in our lives are not bad people; often they are the people closest to us that exhibit difficult behavior. When dealing with a difficult person or situation one must address the behavior to resolve the issue successfully.

When confronted with a difficult situation:

1. **Know what you want.** What is your ideal solution? Is it reasonable?
2. **Check your own behavior.** Are you contributing to the difficult situation with your own difficult behavior?
3. **Close the gap between you and the other person.** While there are several solutions to every problem and most will involve some give and take.

A person exhibiting difficult behavior is looking for some sort of acknowledgement. Don't waste time wishing the difficult person was different; address the difficult behavior. Here are some examples of difficult behavior:

**Tanks:** They demand action. They could care less about how you think or feel. To deal with tanks effectively, understand their need for urgency and show them you are on the same side. Repeat their words. They appreciate assertive behavior if it is directed toward their goal.

**Know-It-Alls and Self-Appointed Experts:** When dealing with these unfocused and controlling people, know your facts but don't be confrontational. Demonstrate that there are two right answers, "You're exactly right, but this is the way we have to do it here."

**Snipers:** These difficult people make cutting remarks under the guise of humor. Snipers rarely give people a chance to respond. Many snipers are uncomfortable with spontaneous conversation. In order to resolve the issue, these people must be (respectfully) confronted by setting a time to discuss the issue and presenting the points you wish to discuss.

**The Arrogant:** Large egos. They know it all and act superior every chance they get. When wrong, they tend to pass the buck. Make sure you know what you are talking about and back it up with documentation. Agree when possible. Ask powerful (specific) questions.

Disagree only when you know you're right. It is best to choose your battles when dealing with the arrogant.

**The Windbag:** They listen more to themselves than others. Keep reminding them to stick to the point. Don't be afraid to interrupt, and it is a good idea to tell them that you "only have a minute." Personal space and non-verbal cues can sometimes be used to end conversations.

**The Slouch:** Lazy and tend to be manipulative. They put more energy into avoiding work than doing the work. Don't cover for slouches and be sure everyone follows this lead. Managers, have them create and stick to a to-do list.

**The Complainer:** Probably the difficult person we deal with the most. The complainer usually wants several things: acknowledgement of the pain or inconvenience they've experienced, an apology/empathy, and they complainer wants to determine the solution but rarely knows what is fair or doable.

When dealing with the complainer, listen to what he/she has to say, be empathetic without taking or assigning blame, then offer choices and let the person choose the solution. This way you keep control of the conversation and the complainer feels that he/she has determined the outcome.

Always approach a conversation with a difficult person respectfully and politely. Don't try to diffuse anger with small talk as the complainer could interpret it as trying to avoid the situation.

Communication is a skill. Effective communicators use their and practice their communication skills and adapt their communicative style to the listener and/or the situation.

*For help with communicating effectively in difficult situations, contact Continuum EAP at: (402) 476-0186 or (800) 755-7636  
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