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Managing Conflict and Difficult People

A New View

in any office you visit, you'll find them. Whether it's the critical manager who finds fault with everyone, a co-worker who complains about everything and everyone, or a demanding client who knows all the answers. They are the ones who can make life difficult and frustrating at the office.

In whatever shape these difficult people come in, they can't be ignored. The trick to dealing with them is to understand how we react to their behaviors and then develop strategies that effectively deal with the actions, behaviors and responses of everyone involved.

We think we know a lot about difficult people. They play the game according to their rules, which creates conflict and stress for everyone else. Characteristics these people may share include:

- Making judgments that close them down to other information;
- Jumping to conclusions without much data;
- Not listening actively;
- Becoming defensive and taking things personally;
- Getting angry, using aggressive language and stirring up emotions;
- Becoming passive and withdrawing;
- Saying "yes" when they really mean "no" and not following through;
- Employing intimidation tactics to get their way;
- Basing negotiation positions on ego rather than the relevant issues.

Starting Point: Look in the Mirror

When I coach people on managing conflict or dealing with difficult people, I start by asking two questions. The first has two parts: "How do you work with difficult people and what is the real problem?" The usual answer is, "Not very well. They create lots of stress and conflict."

Then comes question No. 2: "Are *you* a difficult person?" A few people will admit that they're difficult. The truth is that all of us can become difficult, defensive or aggressive and create conflict and difficulties for others.



The truth is that **all of us** can become difficult, defensive or aggressive.

Revisit the above list of common traits of difficult people and see if you recognize things you do. If you're being honest with yourself, you probably do. This doesn't make you a really difficult person, but should let you know that when you encounter conflict, anyone—even you—can become difficult. Whether you see yourself as a difficult person is not the issue. The issue is that we're often unconscious as to how we react to conflicts, and that we fall into an unconscious pattern of behavior. Since our reactions to conflict often determine the conflict's outcome, we better be clear about how we react.

What's Your Style?

In a study of conflict, psychologists Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilman found that people often react to conflict by behaving, without thinking, in ways learned at an early age. They identify two basic behavioral dynamics: "assertiveness: the extent to which a person attempts to satisfy his own concerns; and cooperativeness: the extent to which the person attempts to satisfy the other person's concerns." They used these dimensions to define five different modes (which they term "conflict style") of responding to conflict situations. See where you fit:

- *Competing: assertive and uncooperative.* Motto: "My way or the highway!" Competitors use whatever power is appropriate, such as skills in arguing, position, economic sanctions, etc.
- *Accommodating: unassertive and cooperative.* Motto: "Whatever you want, just ask!" Appease the other side and forget about your concerns.
- *Avoiding: unassertive and uncooperative.* Motto: "Please leave me alone!"
- *Collaborating: assertive and cooperative.* Motto: "Let's work this out!" This involves digging into an issue to find the underlying needs and wants of the opposing individual.
- *Compromising: moderate assertive and cooperative.* Motto: "Can we split the difference?" Try to find a middle ground and make sure everyone is happy without the deep exploration of collaboration.

How Do We Change?

Conflict, whether at the workplace or in your personal life, is unavoidable. Because problems only get deeper and don't go away if you avoid them, it's essential to become more comfortable with conflict.

The first thing to change is the way we think about conflict.

Conflict is an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the situation at hand, not a game to win or a situation in which we simply roll over and appease the other party.

If we never talk to people about these differences, whether they deal with opinions, feelings or interests, we'll never get a chance to question assumptions we may make about people who are different from us. Once we become more comfortable talking about our differences, it becomes easier to work through them and further enables us to solve problems more effectively.

If I Can Change, So Can You

Remember the starting point I discussed earlier regarding looking in the mirror? That's what I did after some personal changes in my life led me to realize that something was wrong: I rarely got what I wanted either at work or at home. I wasn't assertive and didn't feel comfortable asking others for things that would fulfill my needs. I hovered between avoidance and accommodation. I was just like my family—not assertive and sometimes uncooperative.

I needed to change the way I dealt with conflict.

So I developed a model for change and decided if I was going to make positive change, then I needed to be aware of my behaviors, make commitments to change, develop choices and become assertive in my communications.


A senior partner gave me the opportunity I was waiting for to implement my model.

He certainly met the criteria to be considered "difficult." He pressed me to do things that I didn't want to do. He asked for my ideas, but never seemed to listen to them. He criticized my work without end and assigned me work I didn't like. My response was to clam up, often say "yes" when I should have said "no," and get angry and stuff my feelings inside. As a result, I became a difficult person, too.

I couldn't change him, nor should I have tried. However, I could change my own awareness and behavior.

Following my model, I went to my boss one day and discussed the situation. Surprisingly, he listened. I wasn't angry. I simply planned carefully and presented my case. That conversation changed the way I thought about myself and the way I deal with conflict and difficult people.

Going Beyond Conflict to Positive Change

Conflict in life is inevitable. And while these strategies may not change difficult people, they will enable you to deal with them—and the situation—more effectively. Just remember that dealing with conflict and difficult people is a process. The more you do it, the more it will be like riding a bike: you just get better and better. 

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Top 5 The Assertiveness Process

1. **Know your goals** and be clear what behavior you want and what the consequences are for those involved. Pick the right time and place. Timing is everything.
2. **State your feelings** positively and respect their feelings. Show empathy, respect and a willingness to work through the situation.
3. **State the problems** and negative feelings. Enlist their help in solving the problem. Tell them how the situation affects you.
4. **State your goal** and request different behaviors. Develop some choices for them to choose from and be open to them adding other possible solutions.
5. **Clearly summarize** points of agreement and be clear about the exact terms. Write the agreements down and sum up what will happen next.

10 Tips for Dealing with Difficult People

While you can't avoid difficult people or change them, you can avoid being their victim:

1. **Recognize** the difficult people around you. Identify what their behaviors are and understand it's not about you. You just happen to be the one in their range.
2. **Slow down** and assess the situation. If you let your emotions take hold, you're just helping them drive you crazy.
3. **Set high goals** for your behavior and keep them in mind when you're dealing with difficult people.
4. **Take action.** No matter what, the situation will not change unless you do something. Make sure that the co-worker knows that you don't like the behavior and that you will take it to a higher authority if need be.
5. **Keep your self-esteem and professionalism intact.** Do not sink to their level of behavior. Don't gossip about them, bad mouth them or send threatening letters.
6. **Do not let the problem fester.** People hate conflict so much that they clam up and hold it inside. Bad idea. Take assertive and positive action as soon as possible.
7. **Analyze your choices of action.** In every situation there may be many options. Spend some time away from this person and develop as many alternatives as possible to see which one presents the best response.
8. **Bad bosses are a fact.** They can be nitpickers, arrogant, controlling or just plain difficult—and we have to learn to get along with them. Putting them on the defensive is never a good idea. Pick the most relaxed time and place to talk to them.
9. **Be the one to approach** the difficult person first. With assertive language and a positive attitude, you may be able to restore harmony.
10. **Agree to disagree.** No matter how difficult these people may be, they may have some really good ideas. Find something to appreciate about them and be clear with them and with yourself—it's OK to disagree.