

Dealing With Difficult People

2015 IRA | ILCSWMA | SWANA
Conference

By: Joseph Watson

Introduction

- Difficult people are everywhere. You find them on the streets, at work, in stores and even in your own home. Learning to deal with these people is essential, because there are just too many of them to avoid. It's not that they outnumber the "normal" people, instead it is because no matter how "normal" a person may be, at some point they will become one of the "difficult ones."

What Not to Do

- Don't be defensive.
- Don't act or react with anger or intolerance.
- Don't take it personally.
- Don't blame yourself or the other person for conflicts.
- Don't do anything if the person is yelling until he or she stops
- Don't respond to bad behavior by behaving badly.
- Don't make character attacks or try to be "right".

Step 1: Start With Yourself

- Trying to control the other person usually makes things worse by causing power struggle, defensiveness and criticism.
- Make sure you are not overreacting to the problem. Is the situation new or something you have experienced before, perhaps more than once? Sometimes the problem may not be the other person, but yourself.
- Identify your emotional triggers. We all have "buttons" that can trigger emotional responses. Knowing what yours are will help you control them.
- Prepare yourself for conflicts by learning relaxation techniques and assertive skills. Preparation is especially important for predictable problems with difficult people that you cannot avoid.
- Review your own actions to see if there is anything that you may have done that escalated the problem. Perhaps there were things you could have done that you could do in the future to avoid a repetition of the problem.

Step 2: Ask Questions and Listen

- Start by asking the person why they are upset. This fosters communication instead of arguing. It also puts the responsibility for resolution upon the other person. Then, listen to what the person has to say.
- Listening allows the person to vent their feelings. Use good listening behavior such as nodding, maintaining eye contact and giving small verbal responses.
- Don't respond until the other person has had his or her say.
- Try asking for advice instead of giving answers. If you try to give answers, the person may feel attacked or criticized.
- Ask them what they would like to see you do.

Step 3: Take a Moment

- This can be as simple as asking for a moment to think.
- It will be easier for you to handle the situation once you've calmed down.
- Use the time to discuss the situation with a friend or co-worker. This should be a brainstorming session where you explore ways to solve the situation.

Step 4: Use Empathy

- If you try to see things through their eyes while keeping an open mind, then you will gain a whole new perspective on things.
- Communicate what you think the person is feeling and then ask for feedback. This shows that you are trying to understand their point of view.
- Don't overdo and sound too patronizing or empathetic.
- If empathizing is difficult, then analyze the person's behavior.
- Don't confuse empathy with sympathy, which occurs when you over-identify with the person.
- Offering an apology is a great way to show empathy. You don't have to apologize for your actions to express regret that the person is having a difficult time.

Step 5: Find a Solution

- You may not be able to solve the situation immediately.
- Don't focus on trying to get rid of the person or finding a winner.
- Try having a private discussion with the person.
- Remember to use "I-messages" that focus on what you are feeling and not on blaming the other person.
- Focus on the behavior, not the person.
- Be specific about what is bothering you and what you would like to change.
- Sometimes you can solve the problem by eliminating the person from your life. This can be done by switching jobs, transferring, or reducing the person's access to you.
- Stay focused on your goal. What do you want to get out of the interaction?

Step 6: Keep Things in Perspective

- Ask yourself how important is that person's opinion? Are they making a judgment based on all the facts? Usually, the answer is no. Therefore, you should take their comments and criticisms with a grain of salt.
- Can you learn something about yourself from the experience? Anytime you can learn something, you've walked away from the situation a better person.
- Focus on the positive aspects of the other person. It will help make the other person feel more appreciated, resulting in less conflict. Try to find a way to put the difficult person to good use.
- Try not to waste too much energy and time focusing on the negative experience. Sometimes, you just have to let things go.