

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE

CAREER MANAGEMENT > FIRST 90 DAYS

Congratulations! You have landed a great job/internship and cannot wait to hit the ground running. You love your responsibilities and are eager to contribute to the team. While you are likely to encounter a lot of dedicated and engaging people on your career path, inevitably, you will meet a person, either a co-worker or a supervisor, who can be difficult to work with.

Interacting with a difficult person can be quite frustrating and demoralizing, especially in the work environment. However, according to Diana McLain Smith, author of *The Elephant in the Room: How Relationships Make or Break the Success of Leaders and Organizations*, a challenging co-worker or a boss might be an opportunity for you to grow professionally. Indeed, the American Psychological Association (APA) emphasizes that if a co-worker disagrees with you or a supervisor criticizes a project you have worked on, it is far better to try to see the criticism as valuable information about how to do better instead of taking offense and accepting the interaction as a personal attack. Separating your personal ego from your business persona and seeing yourself as the partner of your co-workers is integral.

Below are a several suggestions to consider when you find yourself interacting with a difficult person:

STEP BACK & EVALUATE

Try to understand the reason(s) behind your co-worker/boss's behavior. If the person you are having issues with generally behaves in a fairly reasonable manner, the difficult behavior could be a result of stress overload at work or personal matters. In such instances, the behavior can be addressed and modified. If, however, the behavior seems to reflect a recurrent intimidating or impolite style of interacting regardless of the amount of stress in the worksite, the chances are less positive that the behavior can change. In fact, you may want to consider seeking counsel from a trusted mentor or human resources professional to evaluate your options. Moreover, remember to monitor and manage your own negative emotions regarding the difficult person's behavior so that you do not engage in self-defeating behavior. Once you understand and manage your own negative reactions, you may work to communicate your concerns, framed in a helpful, positive manner, to create an atmosphere for problem resolution.

BE PERSISTENT

It isn't likely that the difficult person will change overnight, so be prepared for a long road. Moreover, be persistent in addressing bad behavior and putting your plan into action. The key is to not let difficult people get away with bad or unprofessional behavior.

BE PROACTIVE

In all likelihood, you are frustrated with your difficult co-worker/supervisor because he or she consistently displays bad behavior. It is the pattern of bad behavior that drives you crazy. The best way to deal with a difficult person is to have a plan of action in place. The key is to anticipate the bad behavior. Have an action plan ready. Observe the circumstances in which your supervisor/co-worker

behaves badly and devise a plan to address those circumstances before the bad behavior occurs. Most importantly, when your supervisor/coworker is on his/her best behavior, reinforce the good behavior (e.g. “Thank you for clarifying!”).

BE PREPARED

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BE PROFESSIONAL

This is critically important. Follow proper procedures for registering complaints with Human Resources, or higher-level superiors. Maintain a calm and professional demeanor in dealing with difficult co-workers/supervisors, and do not let your emotions get out of hand. Don’t resort to name-calling or rumor-mongering, but be straightforward and professional. You should discuss your concerns — not confront the person. There is a difference. Sometimes employees are hesitant to speak to their boss about criticism for fear of retribution. The chances that your fear of retribution will turn into reality will be significantly reduced to the degree that you can discuss criticism with your boss in a reasonable non-emotional, non-defensive manner. You can avoid setting up your boss to be angry at you and therefore risk retribution by careful planning and diplomatic communication.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Clark, D. (2012). “How to deal with difficult co-workers.” Forbes. Retrieved March 5, 2014 from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/dorieclark/2012/05/23/how-to-deal-with-difficult-co-workers/>

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