Tips to work with difficult people

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1 Self awareness and mindset shifts

1.1 Reframe 'difficult people' to 'difficult behavior'

Reframe Perspectives: Focus on addressing difficult behaviors rather than labeling individuals as difficult.
Manage Personal Triggers: Track and manage your own triggers to respond thoughtfully instead of reacting immediately.
Utilize Empathy: Shift from judgment to curiosity to enhance understanding and connection.
Build Trust: Proactively prepare for potential challenges to ensure smoother interactions.
Set Boundaries: Create collaborative action plans for mutual growth and resolution while upholding boundaries.

1.2 Track your triggers to go from reaction to response

Acknowledge Physical Sensations: Recognize the physical signs when you feel triggered, such as a faster heartbeat or clenched jaw.
Connect Sensations to Triggers: Identify the behavior that caused the physical reaction, like feeling your heart race when receiving critical feedback.
Create an If-Then Plan: Develop a plan to handle triggers thoughtfully, such as taking a breath and asking for time to think before responding to criticism.

1.3 Reframe challenging interactions with a language switch

Language Reframe: Shift your mindset from "I have to" to "I get to" when dealing with difficult behaviors. This small change can transform challenges into opportunities for growth.
Skill Development: Use challenging interactions as opportunities to practice and develop valuable skills, such as collaboration and leadership.
Positive Mindset: Adopting this language switch helps put you in the right mindset to learn and grow from difficult situations.

1.4 Filter for impact to decide what to address

Assess Impact: Determine if the difficult behavior is directly impacting your work. If it affects your deadlines, it's worth addressing.
Identify Patterns: Check if the behavior is an ongoing problem or a one-off situation. Patterns are more important to address.
Evaluate Influence: Consider if you have any influence over the behavior. If it's within your control, take action; if not, seek help from those who can influence it.

1.5 Move from judgment to curiosity

Replace Judgment with Curiosity: Instead of making quick judgments about others' actions, use phrases like "I wonder" to explore the reasons behind their behavior.
Use Empathetic Language: Phrases like "Help me understand" and "I'm curious about" can open up dialogue and foster better communication.
Encourage Collaboration: Curiosity can disarm people and make them feel seen and understood, which promotes collaboration.

2 Strategic communication tools

2.1 Build trust and relational capital before conflict happens

Start with Personal Check-Ins: Begin work meetings with a brief personal check-in to build rapport.
Acknowledge Contributions: Regularly acknowledge and validate people's contributions to build trust over time.
Follow Through on Commitments: Do what you say you will do, and if you can't, acknowledge and apologize.

2.2 Set yourself up for success with reactive colleagues

Provide Processing Time: Give reactive colleagues time to process information by sending agendas in advance and breaking big tasks into smaller ones.
Use Tentative Language: Use phrases like "I'm thinking about suggesting

X, but wanted your perspective first" to lower defenses.

Opt-In for Tough Conversations: Allow colleagues to choose a suitable time for difficult discussions to ensure they are prepared and open.

2.3   Take accountability for your actions

Own Your Part: Acknowledge your role in any conflict, no matter how small, to encourage others to do the same.

Use Accountability Phrases: Phrases like "I contributed to this problem by..." and "I could have handled this better by..." can help in taking responsibility.

Create Space for Collaboration: Taking responsibility doesn't mean letting others off the hook; it creates space for collaborative repair and change.

2.4   Go from 'me vs. you' to 'us vs. the problem

Shift Mindset: Reframe conflicts from "me vs. you" to "us vs. the problem" to foster collaboration.

Common Goals: Remind yourself that both parties are on the same team and share common goals.

Collaborative Solutions: Work together to find solutions that address the problem without wasting time or excluding important stakeholders.

2.5   Address both party's needs

Use Both/And Approach: Start by saying, "Let's find a solution that works for both of us," and name both perspectives to ensure everyone's needs are addressed.

Communicate Needs Clearly: State your need and acknowledge the other person's need, e.g., "I need a clear deadline, and I understand you need flexibility."

Propose Solutions Together: Offer a possible solution and ask for their thoughts, aiming for a middle ground that works for both parties.

2.6   Swap positions to exchange viewpoints

Position Swap Exercise: When in a disagreement, swap positions and argue the other person's side to understand their perspective better.

Loosen Attachment to Being Right: This exercise helps reduce the need to be right and opens up new points of view.
Enhanced Understanding: By seeing the other person's perspective, you might discover new insights that can lead to better decision-making.

3 Boundaries and action plans

3.1 Build your network for ongoing support

Identify Key Support Roles: Build a support network including a sounding board, a problem solver, and an official support.
Proactive Relationship Building: Establish these relationships before you need them by scheduling regular check-ins and offering support in return.
Maintain Professional Boundaries: Ensure you maintain professional boundaries while building and nurturing these relationships.

3.2 Learn a formula to uphold boundaries

Name the Behavior: Clearly state the behavior without judgment, e.g., "I've noticed that you text my personal phone after work hours."
Express Your Need: Communicate your need clearly, e.g., "I need to maintain a healthy work-life balance."
State Your Next Step: Outline what you will do to protect your need, e.g., "So I'll respond to after-hours messages the next business day."

3.3 When to disengage from conflict professionally

Temporary Pauses: Sometimes it's necessary to take a temporary pause to let emotions settle.
Professional Boundaries: If professional boundaries are being crossed or no progress is being made, it might be time to implement an exit strategy.
Clear Communication: Maintain dignity for all parties, use clear communication, and involve your HR manager if needed.