



# Dealing With Difficult People

Most of us have to deal with difficult people from time to time, particularly if we are in the customer service arena. Difficult people not only create conflict, they may sabotage conflict resolution plans as well. Here are some quick tips on how to deal with some common difficult personality types to maintain a productive and pleasant workplace.

## Difficult Personality Types

Certain personalities often prove difficult to deal with. Here are some common types of difficult personalities and tips for constructively managing their behavior.

**Aggressive types** want to force their viewpoint on you. They like to blow off steam. They may attack verbally. When dealing with aggressive behavior:

- Don't attack back.
- Do ask them firmly to calm down and speak their mind.
- Remain calm. Listen without interruption and when they are through, paraphrase the points made to show you heard and understood them. A calm response and the sense that they have been heard will often soothe an aggressive type.

**Know-it-alls** are "experts" who have no patience for other people's input.

- Don't be intimidated, or let them take over a meeting.
- Try to keep them focused. These people often like to hear themselves speak and will go off on tangents
- Do listen to them and try to benefit from their knowledge.

**Victims** often complain and feel they are being treated unfairly.

- Don't try to become their protector.
- Do ask them to provide positive ideas and solutions on how to improve the situation.

**Sarcastic types** use words as weapons, often destroying harmony in a group and causing resentment. They can be poor team players.

- Don't let them get away with this behavior. Let them know that sarcasm is unacceptable.
- Do compliment them when they say something positive or show team spirit.

**Nay-sayers** have nothing good to say about others' ideas.

- Don't try to reform them.
- Do invite them to suggest alternatives. Many times they will back off if asked to say something constructive

**Yay-sayers** will go along with anything just to gain approval.

- Discourage them from making more commitments than they can handle.
- Do make sure they follow through on what they agree to do.

**Withdrawn types** seem to have nothing to contribute and are difficult to draw out.

- Don't nag them to open up.
- Do ask open-ended questions that require them to produce more than a yes or no answer.
- Be patient about waiting for their answer.

## Winning Over Difficult People

Consider the following tips when dealing with difficult or angry people. These can be particularly effective if for those in customer service who must deal with angry customers.

- **Be calm.** Becoming angry or overly excited in response isn't constructive and will only escalate the situation.
- **Give them your undivided attention.** Let them say what's on their mind without interruption.
- **Express empathy** and, if appropriate, say you are sorry.
- **Speak and listen non-defensively.** Don't take it personally. Remember, these people are usually mad at the situation not at you.
- **Paraphrase** what they have said to make sure that you have accurately captured the content and the feelings.
- **Begin active problem solving.** Offer suggestions for solving the problem. If you don't have an immediate solution, explain that you will explore options and get back to them later.
- **Mutually agree on the solution.** Find solutions that are acceptable to everyone and execute them.
- **Follow up.** This is crucial. Just because anger is diffused or an issue is temporarily resolved, do not drop it. Follow through to make sure that action steps are working and to ensure that goals are being met.

## Involving Your Manager

There may be times when, despite your best efforts, you may not be able to manage a difficult person on your own. In this case, you may need to speak to your manager, particularly if the situation is affecting your work or impeding your chances of achieving goals. If this is the case, consider the following tips for discussing issues with your manager.

- Before you speak to your manager, write down all the topics you want to discuss and what you hope to communicate.
- Make sure you're clear about what you want or need from your boss. (E.g., "I need your help in resolving this conflict with my colleague.")
- In private, rehearse what you want to say to your boss. (E.g., "I have tried to work this out on my own by ... but unfortunately it has not worked.")
- When speaking to your boss, use qualifying words, such as "perhaps" and "maybe," rather than absolute words, such as "always," "every," "all the time" and "never." Speaking in absolutes can raise a person's defenses and cause resistance.
- Make "I" statements, such as "I need guidance," instead of "you" statements, such as "You haven't given me guidance."
- Avoid going to your boss when you're emotional. Give yourself a cooling-off period to collect your thoughts and composure.
- If at all possible, talk to your boss before issues become heated and you become emotionally involved.
- Be an active listener. Learn to really listen and understand what your boss says. If you missed or weren't clear about a point, ask your boss to repeat or clarify it.

- Try to repeat and rephrase the points your boss makes during a conversation to show that you're listening and understanding him or her.
- Practice good body language. Look at your boss, lean into the conversation and avoid fidgeting.
- Be assertive, not aggressive.
- Keep an open mind and be open to compromise.
- Avoid gossiping or spreading rumors to your boss.
- Have a positive attitude.
- Be sure to give your boss praise and recognition when it's due. "e.g. Thank you so much for helping me work through my issues with Sally. I am much less distracted now and can better focus on my work."
- Communicate regularly with your boss

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